



## WHITHER RUSSIA?

<b>■ COMMENTARY</b>	
Can War Be Normalized? Andrey Makarychev (University of Tartu)	2
Whither Russia and Russian Studies? Peter Rutland (Wesleyan University)	3
Why Predictions Fail: Forecasting Russia's Future Vladimir Gel'man (Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki)	4
Russia's Ambivalent Pathways Alena Ledeneva (University College London)	6
Russian <i>Nyet</i> works: Why a Lack of Connectivity Will Be Putin's Main Legacy Robert Orttung (George Washington University)	7
Between Depoliticization and Nationalist Awakening: Russian Society and Regime in the Shadow of a Prolonged War Alexander Libman (Freie Universität Berlin)	9
No Way Out? Why the West Should Offer an Exit Option to Russia's Elites and Population Michael Rochlitz (University of Bremen)	10
Party Politics in Russia: Two and a Half Scenarios Jan Matti Dollbaum (University of Bremen)	12

## COMMENTARY

## Can War Be Normalized?

Andrey Makarychev (University of Tartu)

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Russia's troubles with its invasion of Ukraine are not related solely to the military situation in the battlefields. They also stem from the collision of two radically incompatible strategies of "selling" the war to domestic audiences: normalization and exceptionalization. Their conflation creates a situation of strategic undecidability and confusion as to which endgame scenario the Kremlin would prefer.

On the one hand, Putin's military interventionism is an endless series of multiple exceptions—from the obvious over-fixation on Ukraine in the Russian mainstream media to the previously unseen practice of recruiting convicts to fight in Ukraine. Sergei Kirienko's appeal to transform the so-called "special military operation" into a "people's war" is one of the clearest illustrations of exceptionalist thinking among the Russian elites. The parallels with the Second World War so ubiquitous in Russian narratives and imagery are also meant to detach the war from normal politics and underline its extraordinary qualities.

This year's cancellation of the traditional march of commemoration known as the "Immortal Regiment" adds new colors to the panoply of exceptions. The decision signifies de facto acceptance of the state of emergency, which implies a deviation from the highly symbolic ceremonies memorializing the Great Patriotic War as the core of today's Russian identity.

On the other hand, this logic is counter-balanced by a tendency to normalize the war. This normalization takes three forms. One is an attempt to confine the war to a media event visible on TV screens and disregard its malicious effects on the entire society, the majority of which continues to live regular lives. Another is the routinization of war's consequences and their implicit acceptance as a "new normal"—for example, recruitment to the occupying army is advertised as a lucrative job. Similarly, the reactions of local authorities to the spill-over of military activities to such Russian territories as Belgorod oblast have mostly been technical and managerial—for example, evacuation of some parts of the population from the most vulnerable areas. The third is Russia's performative normalization of its foreign policy by debunking the narrative of its isolation in the world and demonstrating the vitality of its relations

with countries of the global South, named "the global majority" in today's mainstream discourse.

Putin's reference to the recent drone attack on the Kremlin as "nothing extraordinary" (*Radio Svoboda* 2023) is illustrative in this regard. The logic behind this surprisingly calm reaction goes beyond the therapeutic tranquilization of society. What Putin implied might be interpreted in two different ways: either as an indication of a lack of resources—both material and discursive—for further escalation or as an attempt to get people to accept the war and its effects as routine parts of their daily lives.

Putin's intention of normalizing the war resonates with domestic depoliticization, a major trend characterizing Russian society, which prefers to refrain from engaging with issues of political salience. This phenomenal combination of societal atomization and pragmatic adaptation to any state policy has been conducive to passive justification of the war in Ukraine by most of the population. Immersion in the private sphere, indifference to normative matters, and ignorance of how the world functions beyond Russia are fertile grounds for implicit routinization of the war.

The same goes for different narratives that seek to either rationalize Russia's military intervention or marginalize its importance in international affairs, including "Putin's understanders" and Westsplainers. They use different language tools—for example, whataboutism, biased historical analogies, and parallels—to find an "alternative logic" in the war against Ukraine or even to blame the West for its eruption. In all cases, the war is seen as an unfortunate yet ordinary event that does not require an exceptional response.

Of course, this is not the first time that Russian official discourse has tried to combine incompatible or inconsistent arguments. Since the start of the military intervention against Ukraine, Putin has sought to both exceptionalize and normalize it. This only increases a sense of disorientation and frustration in society, which seems to be ready to support the war without necessarily understanding the reasons for it—exactly as they would most likely be ready to support any change in Russian strategy, from further escalation to peace talks with Ukraine.

### *About the Author*

Andrey Makarychev is Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Tartu.

### *Further Reading*

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## Whither Russia and Russian Studies?

Peter Rutland (Wesleyan University)

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The invasion of Ukraine shattered the prevailing paradigms of Russian studies. It was the first full-scale invasion of one country by another in Europe since World War II, casting doubt on assumptions we all held about the norms governing state behavior. It also forced most observers to question their understanding of the dynamics of Russian politics, since few of us had imagined that a genocidal assault on Ukraine was in the cards.

The world post-February 24 looks very different than the pre-February 24 world, and that is particularly true for our understanding of Russia itself.

The impact of the invasion on the study of Russia was compounded by the fact that it disrupted the personal lives of the majority of the experts on whom we relied to follow Russian politics. Hundreds of scholars and journalists were forced to flee Russia and make new lives for themselves abroad. This limits their ability to gather information, as well as—given the exigencies of their personal trauma—their capacity to process it objectively and dispassionately. Those scholars remaining in Russia have either fallen silent or become mouthpieces of the regime.

The shock of the invasion was followed by the escalation of repression of the political opposition inside Russia: the arrest of some 20,000 protesters, draconian new laws suppressing criticism, long jail terms for leading dissidents, and the return of denunciations of people with dissenting views by members of the public.

On top of the increased repression, there was the disturbing realization that a majority of ordinary Russians support the war. At least half the population seem to have accepted the Kremlin narrative, while less than a quarter oppose the war, with the remainder adopting a wait-and-see approach. (The sociological evidence is expertly reviewed in Schulman 2023.)

Such a radical break in real-world events will undoubtedly produce an equally radical paradigm shift in how we explain Russian politics. It is far too early to say where this intellectual revolution is headed, and hence what kind of future scenarios for Russia we might envision.

The prevailing paradigm of the last three decades was the now-derided “transitology” school. It was assumed that the Soviet collapse meant the “end of history,” and that Russia and the other newly independent states would transition to liberal democracy and market capitalism, albeit at varying speeds and with varying degrees of success. Even as Russia became increasingly authoritarian, much of the scholarly attention remained

focused on the electoral system and opposition social movements, fueled by the hope that a color revolution of the sort that had overthrown authoritarian leaders in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005 would come to Russia. The protest wave of 2011–12 that greeted Putin’s return to the presidency was the apogee of that scholarly focus, but interest in Aleksei Navalny as the heroic leader of the opposition persisted up through his poisoning and arrest in 2021.

The invasion has terminally undermined the transition-to-democracy paradigm. No one seriously believes that liberal forces will come to power in Russia in the foreseeable future. (Their return in the unforeseeable future is still possible.) Even before the 2022 invasion there was a debate over whether it was appropriate to see Russia as a “fascist” state. Fascism is an emotionally charged term and tends to collapse into comparisons with Nazi Germany, a very distinctive political formation that lasted only 13 years.

The most readily available alternative to the democratic transition paradigm is the idea that Russia is reverting to its Soviet past. Although the Soviet Union collapsed 30 years ago, there is a high degree of continuity in some important social institutions (such as the repressive apparatus) and in the personnel running the state. Moreover, among the general population, those over the age of 65 are twice as likely to support the war as those under 30. The median age is 40, so nearly half of all Russians still have personal direct experience of growing up in the Soviet Union.

This means that scholars will have to go back to the history books and refresh their understanding of the dynamics of Soviet-type society. There are several problems with this. First, we don’t know which Soviet Union is the relevant model: it is that of 1937, or 1970, or 1985? Second, the world has changed, and contemporary Russia lacks the rigorous ideological worldview that inspired and maintained the Soviet system for three generations.

Vladimir Putin’s own preferred frame of reference is not the Soviet Union, but the Tsarist Empire. He made this clear in his infamous July 2021 article laying out the case for the invasion of Ukraine, in which he derided the idea of an independent Ukraine as a Soviet construct. Annexing Crimea restored Russia to its 1783 borders, and that is Putin’s legacy achievement, jeopardized by Ukraine’s rearmament and growing ties to NATO.

Russia’s claim to great-power status rests on three factors. Two are inherited from the Soviet Union (its nuclear arsenal and the oil and gas export complex)

and one from the Tsarist Empire (its vast territorial expanse).

Perhaps the most obvious frame for understanding Russia is that of a return to empire. That is the position, for example, of Stephen Kotkin (Remnick 2022). However, such an approach is a minority view among Russia specialists, who see it as cultural essentialism and excessively determinist.

The dominant discussion among U.S. scholars takes place around the need to “decolonize” Russian studies. (That is the official theme of the annual convention of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, to be held in November 2023.) This is a positive development, in the sense that it means turning attention away from Moscow-centric narratives and

exploring the perspectives of groups on the periphery of the Russian Empire. However, there are some problems with the decolonization approach. First, it often involves *deconstructing* the concept of empire by stressing the hybridity and fluidity of colonial categories. Second, it is drawn directly from post-colonial studies of the European oceanic empires, whose empires were dismantled 50 years ago. Russia is currently actively engaged in imperial conquest, so it is not clear that “decolonization” is the most appropriate analytical framework.

At some point, the war will end. And at some point, Putin will leave the Kremlin. But given the deep structural forces that have driven Russia to war, it is hard to be optimistic about the prospects for radical change in the political regime any time soon.

#### *About the Author*

*Peter Rutland* is Professor of Government at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT, and vice president of the Association for the Study of Nationalities.

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## Why Predictions Fail: Forecasting Russia’s Future

Vladimir Gel’man (Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki)

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For experts on Russia, there is probably nothing more in demand, and at the same time more speculative, than the business of predicting Russia’s political future. Many experts are valued in the eyes of policymakers, as well as those of the public, primarily for their forecasts, rather than for their theoretical explanations, methodological sophistication, and data analysis. If someone is able to make assumptions that prove to be factually correct over time, then he/she may be rewarded irrespective of the substantive grounds for his/her predictions. With regard to Soviet studies, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse is probably the best-known example of such predictions. In 1978, she published a book in which she argued that the Soviet Union would collapse by 1990 due to the rise of the Muslim population in Central Asia, which would cause Islamic revolt and a drive for independence from the Soviet empire. Although the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 for completely different reasons, she received outstanding academic recognition and became a permanent secretary of the French Academy, despite the fact that the academic value of her forecast was dubious.

The problem, however, is not only that experts’ forecasts of Russia’s future are no more precise or substantively grounded than predictions made by taxi drivers. Virtually all forecasts of this kind (not only with regard to Russia), whether made by professionals or amateurs, are based on projecting a current state of affairs into the future—albeit with some corrections and reservations, adjusting for either positive or negative factors. This has contributed to a status-quo bias, as major breakthrough changes tend to remain beyond the scope of forecasts. However, in response to major exogenous shocks such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the amplitude of predictions has multiplied greatly, paving the way for numerous far-reaching expectations, ranging from nuclear war to Russia’s territorial breakdown. These expectations are often less grounded in data-driven analyses than they are reflective of the fears and/or hopes of those experts who tend to make such predictions. Meanwhile, real-world developments often follow a different logic, due in particular to “wild cards”—unexpected and sometimes unpredictable factors that alter possible scenarios.

It should therefore come as no surprise that forecasting Russia's future can turn into a lottery, especially given the acceleration of all developments after February 24, 2022, the invasion having shortened the time horizons not only of all domestic and international actors, but also of observers.

Attempts to forecast Russia's future come up against the unavoidable problem of multiple unknown variables. These cannot necessarily be defined and measured even at the present moment, making reasonable estimations of how they may change in the future exceedingly challenging. In present-day Russia, the limited availability and conflicting interpretations of some data (such as economic statistics) and the dubious reliability of others (such as public opinion surveys) aggravate these problems, making efforts to determine the probability of certain developments in the country all but pointless. The unclear situation on the front lines, covered by the "fog of war," greatly increases this uncertainty. As a result, forecasting is more difficult than ever.

Experts often seek to compensate for a lack of data by referring to parallels with certain episodes in the history of Russia and/or of other countries, ranging from the First World War to the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan. These parallels, however, tell us little about potential developments in post-2023 Russia, as each episode had a different set of initial conditions and factors driving changes (or a lack thereof). This is why making full-scale comparisons of certain cases in the past is not always useful for making predictions about the future. Even large-N comparisons of multiple episodes of wars and their impacts on autocracies in the past can at best tell us the statistical probability of certain trajectories in the future, rather than enabling us to make predictions about present-day Russia.

To summarize, more focused, partial, and short-term predictions are usually more precise and more useful than full-scale, comprehensive, and long-term forecasts, especially in times of major crises. This is why, instead of attempting to trace Russia's future trajectories, I propose a different intellectual enterprise: attempting to rule out those scenarios that are widely considered in the media but do not appear to be grounded in evidence. Among these, three major delusions merit special objections:

*First*, predictions that see Russia's territorial division into several states as inevitable. These are based upon parallels with the collapse of the Soviet Union and/or other empires. However, despite Russia's ethnic diversity and problems with governing certain areas, it should be admitted that present-day Russia is a relatively homogenous country. It therefore has much less potential for

disintegration than the Soviet Union or Austria-Hungary, especially given that regional governance in Russia is based on different institutional foundations. And even if one might expect separatist attempts in some ethnic republics, there is no reason to predict that Saratov will separate from Volgograd or Pskov from Novgorod.

*Second*, predictions of major nation-wide mass uprisings against the Russian regime if and when Russia's military effort fails completely. These expectations ignore the fact that Russia lacks formal and informal organizations that might organize anti-regime collective actions and coordinate this activism across the country for some period of time. Such organizations rarely emerge from scratch without major support from elites, hence even large-scale public discontent is unlikely to contribute to such an outcome. Localized protests in certain cities and regions seem much more plausible, but they may not necessarily constitute a major challenge to the regime.

*Third*, predictions that "after Putin there will be Putin"—in other words, that if and when Putin's rule comes to an end, Russia will continue to pursue its militant and aggressive domestic and foreign policy agendas, perhaps even in a harsher way. Irrespective of the timeframe within which they are expected to unfold (that is, whether they envision Putin remaining in power for years or decades), these predictions ignore the highly personalist nature of the Russian political regime. Putin's policy agenda cannot be transferred to the post-Putin leadership without major changes. Equally, nor should one expect the immediate full-scale democratization of post-Putin Russia: such an outcome is not entirely outside the realm of possibility, but this path will not be taken by default.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the unrealistic scenarios that have been propounded, but it is important to limit the pool of predictions and concentrate on realistic drivers of continuity and change in Russia instead of drawing of rosy or gloomy pictures of the future. One must admit that scholars may be factually incorrect in their forecasting of Russia's future and not fear these almost inevitable errors. However, thinking about the possible paths and forks of Russia's development will not only help experts to interpret potential changes in the future, but also provide a certain perspective that is useful for understanding the present. This understanding should be based on experts' awareness of the limits and constraints of Russia's possible trajectories, but should also take into account the possibility of unexpected dynamics at critical junctures—in Russia and elsewhere.

*About the Author*

Vladimir Gel'man is a professor of Russian politics at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki. His most recent book is *The Politics of Bad Governance in Contemporary Russia* (University of Michigan Press, 2022).

## Russia's Ambivalent Pathways

Alena Ledeneva (University College London)

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The 1987 Nobel laureate for literature, Joseph Brodsky, branded ambivalence “the key characteristic of my nation.” Like the concept of “doublethink” coined by George Orwell, ambivalence resolves itself in a particular context where one set of norms takes precedence over others. It is different from ambiguity or duplicity, but for Brodsky the relevance of ambivalence for understanding the Russian mindset is associated with the pressure the system puts on people to lie, comply or imitate support. I have come across the issue of lies—or, rather, self-deception—in my fieldwork while studying the workings of informal networks in the daily life of the Soviet Union (1998), informal practices in business and politics in post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s (2006), and the Russian leadership’s use of network-based informal governance tools since the 2000s (2013). Indeed, I have found that patterns of ambivalence appear in various forms: doublethink, double deed, double standard, and double motivation. In 2014, I started the [Global Informality Project](#), which helps create global comparisons of informal practices, suggest alternative angles, and calibrate views, including those on Russia.

It turns out that [Russia is no more informal than other countries](#), but a combination of geographical, historical, political, and economic factors push Russians to maintain compliant facades while engaging in survival strategies. Russia is both enriched by nature and [fooled by randomness](#). Russians have no choice but to believe in their exceptionality and their special purpose, of which they find proof either in geographical factors outside human control or in events hardly determined by merit, such as defeating Napoleon or Hitler with the help of the Russian winter, overthrowing the extremely weak monarchy in 1917, stealing the design for the nuclear bomb or winning Olympic medals by having athletes take steroids.

Russia is ruined by its ambitious, merciless leaders, yet also cherishes those leaders. Russia is saved by the sacrifice of rank-and-file people, yet the individual lives of these misled people are not valued. Stalin remains one of the most popular leaders among Russians despite presiding over mass murder, famine, and repression. Putin’s popularity has been on the rise since he embarked on a brutal war in Ukraine. Russians see themselves as exceptional people: proud, daring (people for whom the law is no equal), and able to stand up for themselves regardless of the human cost.

Soviet modernization was unparalleled in terms of human cost, but also human achievement. When

the Communists formed the USSR—comprised of the Russian empire minus Finland, Poland, and the Baltic states—in 1922, the country was in ruins, 75% of its citizens were illiterate, more than 80% lived in the countryside, agriculture was the main sector of the economy, and life expectancy hovered around 45 years. By the 1970s, the USSR was the second largest industrial economy in the world and a nuclear and space power. Its entire citizenry was literate and two-thirds lived in urban areas. Thus, the Communist leadership transformed the country from agrarian to industrial, from illiterate to well-educated, from male-dominated to emancipated, and from rural to urban, and provided universal medical care. But this outcome was achieved despite—rather than due to—its written constitutions, ostensibly the most democratic in the world. The Soviet constitutions were Potemkin façades hiding the realities of the authoritarian regime: the ideological monopoly of the Communist Party; intolerance of any dissent; and neglect of fundamental human rights such as freedom of conscience, expression, and assembly.

Paradoxically, Soviet modernization became one of the main reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union. It created an economic infrastructure that was incompatible with the market economy. The country’s giant factories—works of engineering genius built thanks to the heroic efforts of imprisoned Soviet citizens in the midst of the tundra, taiga, and desert—became uncompetitive as soon as the state let prices float freely. Monotowns constructed around these enterprises turned into ghost towns. Millions of engineers and skilled workers lost their jobs. Thousands of suppliers were pushed into bankruptcy. The great modernization of the twentieth century came to a tragic end. The same seems to be happening with the post-Soviet reforms: likewise unprecedented in their scale and timespan, they have resulted in Russia’s integration into global markets but seem to have ended in gloomy T-junctions, as [depicted in Russian folklore](#). Saltykov-Shchedrin famously captured the country’s trajectory as a paradox: everything changes dramatically every five to ten years but nothing within 200!

The war will lead to the next two-step-forward modernization, which will result in one-step-back outcomes. The push-me-pull-you dynamics with Europe will continue well into the twenty-first century. The economy will continue to prioritize sovereignty over openness; technological isolation will follow. Russian entrepreneurs will continue to feed their families and security

forces. Russian rulers will rely on informal governance and weak property rights. Russian emigration and capital flight away from *sistema* will be counterbalanced by mass patriotic consolidation that will drive the opposing minority into so-called “internal emigration,” if not prisons. Three additional factors will determine Russia’s trajectory in the medium term: human capital in the tech industry, natural resources in the sphere of sustainability, and leadership change. The corresponding bifurcation points are:

*First*, Russia will or will not be able to develop a strong digital economy, with the technology sector driving growth and development. A lot will depend on whether Russia’s tech generation can parallel the success of the likes of Google, Apple, or Netflix or departs to work for global companies.

*Second*, Russia will or will not be able to respond to the global challenge of balancing economic growth with the preservation of the planet by developing an economy that does not depend on natural resources. Either

#### *About the Author*

*Alena Ledeneva* is Professor of Politics and Society at University College London and a founder of the Global Informality Project (in-formality.com). She is the author of *Russia’s Economy of Favours* (1998), *How Russia Really Works* (2006), and *Can Russia Modernize?* (2013), and the editor of *The Global Encyclopedia of Informality* (2018). She holds a PhD from Newnham College, University of Cambridge.

demand for Russia’s natural resources will decrease dramatically, with the result that Russia will lose its natural resource rent and become a secondary power, or, as history suggests, Russia will turn to offering the next needed resource (perhaps water), thereby allowing the country to continue to collect rent without modernizing its economy.

*Third*, Russia will or will not be able to create a system of governance that can counterbalance the power of its leaders and reward compliance over talent. As long as leaders remain in office for an unlimited period, they will continue to be uncontrollable, leaving Russia to navigate a rocky path marked by unexpected crises and additional waves of emigration. Modernizing *sistema* would be a step toward controlling the forces that keep Russia captured by informal networks. Embracing ambivalence in governance will be another challenge for Russia’s future leaders, who will need to be skillful enough to read the country’s trajectory, if not correct the swinging of Russia’s pendulum.

## Russian *Nyet*works: Why a Lack of Connectivity Will Be Putin’s Main Legacy

Robert Orttung (George Washington University)

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Modern societies rely on networks to innovate, evolve, and thrive. President Vladimir Putin’s systematic destruction of Russian networks, both domestic and international, will doom the country to primitivism and growing irrelevance to the advanced economies.

### Social Capital

Discussions of social capital have long had a prominent place in social science analyses. Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Putnam, and more recently Steven Johnson have written about the value of strong networks. For Bourdieu, they provide the ability to overcome the domination of others in your “field.” Putnam sees them as underpinning the vitality of democracy. Johnson’s liquid networks lead to greater innovation of the kind found in Silicon Valley and few other places in the world.

Since coming to office, Putin has systematically destroyed Russia’s network infrastructure. Over the course of more than two decades, he has dismantled the limited freedoms that Russians gained following the

end of the Soviet Union. He has relentlessly whittled away at the freedoms of the press, speech, and assembly. Non-governmental organizations now have less space to operate than they did even a few years ago and can increasingly only perform functions that are approved by the state.

Putin was long famous for not understanding the Internet and thus allowing Russians greater freedom online than people living under other authoritarian leaders, such as China’s Xi Jinping, whose Great Fire Wall much more comprehensively excludes unwanted voices. Yet the freedom of the Runet, too, is now much more circumscribed than it once was.

Russia’s universities no longer serve as sources of new or critical thinking. Many of the best and most original thinkers have left the country. State pressure makes it impossible to provide a critical analysis of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine—or even to call the ongoing fighting a “war.” In a healthy society, the university would serve as a platform for bringing together people

from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds to share thoughts and develop new concepts. It would lead a critical examination of the mistakes of the country's leaders with the goal of ensuring that future leaders do not make the same ones. Just as Russia never really came to terms with the crimes of the twentieth century, it is unlikely to critically examine the war crimes of its current leader.

Beyond the domestic system, Putin's war of aggression has eliminated many of Russia's ties with the advanced economies of the West. Some (but not all) Western firms have left the Russian market. Many Western countries have imposed bans on new relationships with Russian universities and many of the exchange programs that once developed strong people-to-people ties no longer operate. This development is a loss for both sides, but particularly hurts Russian universities since their best scholars are leaving for opportunities elsewhere and those who remain are cut off from international networks that promote scholarship.

### Atomization

Putin is famous for being a "network of one" with limited access to reliable information, honest advisers, and foreign contacts. His policies, developed in self-imposed isolation after more than two decades in power, are atomizing society in exactly the way that theorists of totalitarianism like Hannah Arendt described during the Stalin era. Now, as then, Russia is a country ruled by fear. A lack of trust among citizens makes it difficult to coordinate collective actions. There are only a handful of street protests, a decline even from the low levels of recent years. People are afraid to connect, much less to express opinions that the Kremlin does not want them to say out loud.

Where can a society like this go from here? We can draw several conclusions. First, given the overall paralysis in Russia, nothing is likely to change until Putin is gone. Most likely, he will remain in power until his death of natural causes. Since most of the ruling elite in Russia depend on his presence to keep the current system in place, there is little chance that insiders will seek to remove him. Even a defeat on the battlefield and

a full withdrawal from Ukrainian territory would likely change little inside Russia.

Second, in the medium term, Russian society is unlikely to move out of stagnation. Most of the country's dynamic people have fled the country, leading to a massive loss of talent. Those who remain must constantly look over their shoulders for fear that they are being monitored. Few are likely to take initiative in such a situation; it is simply safer to do nothing and retreat into the safety of a quiet private life.

Third, the country will become increasingly militarized. The increased levels of conscription and the need to convert factories to military production to replace used weapons will reduce the amount of money available for other investments. Plans for regional development will languish as money is shipped to the front and spent on military purposes. Similarly, the media and education system will be devoted to preparing soldiers willing to sacrifice for their country rather than citizens who have the skills to improve well-being.

### Goodbye, Russia

Putin and his enablers' destruction of Russia's once-burgeoning civil society, media, and universities has set Russia back by decades. The linkages that had been expanding between Russia and the West have now been severed and are unlikely to be restored.

Finland's decision to join NATO marks a dramatic shift in relations with Europe. Ukraine will also likely seek to join NATO, as remaining outside the defensive alliance would leave Ukrainians vulnerable to future Russian attacks and become a source of instability in the heart of Europe. Drawing a bright line between Russia and the West is the only way to prevent future aggression from this country.

Such a prospect irrevocably dashes the hopes for peaceful competition that bubbled up as the Soviet Union collapsed more than thirty years ago. As Western democracies face their own serious troubles, they will probably continue their struggles in growing isolation from Russia.

#### *About the Author*

*Robert Ortung* is a research professor of International Affairs at George Washington University.

## Between Depoliticization and Nationalist Awakening: Russian Society and Regime in the Shadow of a Prolonged War

Alexander Libman (Freie Universität Berlin)

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The war in Ukraine catapulted Russia into a new reality. From the point of view of the political ideas (or rather delusions) of Putin and his narrow circle, the war is a logical outcome of their long-term development. From the point of view of the functioning of the Russian regime, however, the highly personalized nature of Putin's authoritarianism, combined with enormous information problems in the bureaucratic hierarchy, made the war fundamentally possible but not inevitable. The war is an extreme example of the highly costly mistakes to which decision-making in this type of regime is prone, yet the bureaucracy and the elites were not prepared for a war. From the point of view of Russian society, finally, the war represents a fundamental break with the development trajectory of recent decades. Until 2022, Russian society was undergoing a transformation into a more European, modern society (leading to increasing contradictions between the society and the authoritarian regime). The war halted this transformation and inaugurated a complex process of adaptation on the part of both regime actors and the population. The future of Russian politics depends on the outcomes of this adaptation.

A year after the war began, some scope conditions for this development appear to be increasingly clear. To start with, the sanctions regime—contrary to what some expected at the beginning of the war—did not lead to a catastrophic collapse of the Russian economy. A combination of the adaptability of a market economy (which Russia is, unlike the USSR) and the unwillingness of China, India, and the countries of the Global South to join the sanctions regime ensured the resilience of the Russian economy. Russia did not become a new North Korea or Venezuela: for this to happen, the Russian central bank and the government would also have had to have made bad decisions in the sphere of economic policy that would have prevented markets from adapting. While the sanctions certainly make any long-term positive economic development impossible, they do not prevent the Russian economy from functioning and thus do not fundamentally limit the regime's ability to continue the war.

A much more important source of instability for the regime has turned out to be its own actions. A prolonged war creates a challenge for the Putin system. On the one hand, there is a permanent demand for new soldiers for the frontlines, which can be satisfied either through

coerced mass mobilization or by fomenting widespread nationalist sentiment that causes people to enlist voluntarily. On top of that, the war provides ample opportunity for those actors who would like to see the Russian regime become more ideological to openly express their rhetoric and to push for their agendas. These actors operate at all levels, from politicians and high-level bureaucrats devising new repressive measures to ordinary citizens denouncing their neighbors and colleagues for what they perceive as disloyalty. On the other hand, until the start of the war, the key element of regime stability in Russia was the depoliticization of the largest part of the population, which neither openly contested the regime's propaganda and claim to power nor engaged in any enthusiastic demonstrations of loyalty thereto, and was left to lead a private life. It is hardly possible to keep most Russians depoliticized while simultaneously implementing mass mobilization measures and allowing ultranationalist and imperialist rhetoric. The regime has not managed to solve this dilemma, reducing its credibility in the eyes of its supporters and opponents alike. It also poses a challenge for the bureaucracy, which simply does not know how to navigate this trade-off.

The escalatory logic of the war, which will sooner or later reach most Russians, seems to have kicked off the slow transformation of Russian society. Many in the West hope that disillusionment with the war will lead to growing disapproval of the regime. Unfortunately, there is an alternative (and highly realistic) scenario: the more Russians suffer directly from the war (due, for example, to their relatives dying on the frontlines), the more likely they are to change their perception of the war: "Putin's war" might become, in their eyes, the "war of every Russian." Despite recognizing that the war was an outcome of catastrophic miscalculations on the part of the regime, Russians would then believe that the growing costs of the war made some sort of victory absolutely necessary and that it was the duty of each and every member of the society to contribute to the war effort. Russian society would experience a nationalist awakening, with spontaneous self-organization leading to greater support of the military effort. The fact that Putin is successfully managing to "sell" the war to his subjects as one between Russia and the West (not Russia and Ukraine) might facilitate this process.

If Russian society continues to evolve along these lines, the results could be disastrous. Not only would it

be much more difficult to stop the war in the future, but Russia could turn into a country where most people have internalized strong anti-Western sentiments and believe that Russia should oppose the US and the EU at all costs in any situation possible. This type of resentment would be very difficult to eradicate and would make Russia much more dangerous in the long run than it is now.

This scenario becomes more likely with each day the war goes on. Stopping the conflict soon could halt Russians' nationalist awakening and push them back into a depoliticized state; under these conditions, anti-Westernism in Russia will remain superficial and able to be reversed (e.g., by Putin's successor, who will sooner or later come to power). But if Russian society becomes politicized, its strong anti-Western sentiments are likely to outlive the Putin regime and dictate the evolution of Russian politics in the long run.

#### *About the Author*

*Alexander Libman* is Professor of Russian and East European Politics at the Freie Universität Berlin. His research interests include Russian domestic and international politics and comparative research on authoritarianism. His books have been published by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press and his articles by *American Political Science Review*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *World Politics*, and *Comparative Political Studies*, among others.

Those in the West who oppose the idea of freezing the conflict may underestimate the long-term risks of this societal evolution for Europe and for the world. Certainly, freezing the conflict is impossible without the agreement of Ukraine (which is unlikely now and cannot be forced from outside); furthermore, it is associated with risks (a ceasefire might be unstable and Russia might maintain control of some Ukrainian territory). However, the transformation of Russian society, if not stopped as soon as possible, might produce a much bigger risk: a nuclear power with large natural resources, economic ties to China and the Global South, and (and this is something that we have not seen in Russia/the Soviet Union since the 1960s) with a population and elites that share a deep aversion to Europe and the West. While a frozen conflict is certainly a suboptimal solution, the alternative could be much worse.

## No Way Out? Why the West Should Offer an Exit Option to Russia's Elites and Population

Michael Rochlitz (University of Bremen)

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With Russia's high-intensity war against Ukraine entering its 15<sup>th</sup> month, both countries' futures look bleak. Ukraine has to fight for its survival against a foe that seems determined to fight on and still has ample reserves of manpower and natural resources. The West is supporting Ukraine with weaponry, but the war is fought on Ukraine's territory, and its economy and people are suffering heavily.

Russia's future looks similarly bleak, if not worse. The country's leadership has maneuvered itself into a grim impasse. The war is going badly for Russia, but having staked everything on one card, Putin and his cronies cannot end it without losing face. Even if offered such an option, it remains unclear if they would take it, as it seems increasingly likely that fighting this war is what they wanted all along (Courtois et al. 2023). In the meantime, Russia is bleeding soldiers at a rate likely much higher than Ukraine, as Ukraine is fighting with more modern weaponry and more advanced doctrine. The war has also deprived Russia of its economic future. The long-term costs of losing Europe's energy markets are severe (Babina et al. 2023). Moreover, hundreds of

thousands of highly qualified specialists, in particular from the IT sector, have left the country (Borak 2023). Many of them are unlikely to return, depriving Russia of the possibility to diversify its economy in preparation for a time after oil and gas. Meanwhile, Russia's shift toward a harsher form of authoritarianism is intensifying a problem with which the Russian economy has long struggled, namely the heavy-handed pressure on Russia's business community by the security services (Rochlitz 2022). Finally, the risk that Russia might break apart and descend into a new "time of troubles" is no longer completely unrealistic, with infighting between different factions becoming increasingly and openly visible (Rogov 2023).

### The West Needs a Strategy for Russia's Future

For now, Western sanctions are mainly aimed at limiting Russia's economic ability to fight the war and signaling that continuing to do so would be very costly for the Russian economy. In this, they have been successful. Nevertheless, the economic or political collapse of

Russia would be disastrous for the West. There is thus a need for a viable long-term strategy for Russia. The West needs to send a clear signal to the different stakeholders in Russia that the sanctions are not aimed against the Russian people or against Russia as a country, but only against Putin and his war of aggression in Ukraine. If such a strategy were to be devised, whom should it address and what should it look like?

Over the last 20 years, Putin has done a thorough job of depoliticizing and atomizing Russian society, eliminating groups and actors who were willing to take responsibility for the future of the country. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify four different groups of stakeholders with different attitudes toward the war and Russia's future.

### Four Groups of Stakeholders

The group that has been pulling the strings for the last couple of years and that is responsible for the current disaster is the security services. Their leadership—in particular Putin, Bortnikov, Patrushev, and a number of other high-level *siloviki*—have made it clear that their increasingly weird views of the world are not some sophisticated charade; they indeed believe what they are saying. This is in part a result of Putin's strategy to replace competent officials with ones that are less qualified but loyal and ideologically closer to his views (Petrov and Rochlitz 2019, Egorov and Sonin 2023). It also results from a failure by Russia's elites to engage with and come to terms with the crimes of the KGB and the Soviet past (Belton 2021). The desperate attempts by several Western politicians to prevent a Russian invasion in early 2022 have shown that it might be very difficult, if not impossible, to lead a constructive dialogue with this group.

Fortunately, they are not the only stakeholders active in Russia. Two other groups that have played an important role over the last year are the country's national and regional economic administrations, and Russia's business community. Over the last 15 years, Russia has suffered a number of severe economic shocks, such as the 2008/2009 financial crisis, the annexation of Crimea and the ensuing sanctions, the Covid pandemic, and now the war with Ukraine. During these disasters, Russia's administrations and its business community have become increasingly apt at working together to mitigate and resist economic shocks by accumulating sufficient reserves in calmer times, hedging investments,

and always expecting the next possible disaster. This is not an efficient way to manage an economy, but it is a matter of survival in an economy such as Russia's, and it permitted Russia to soften the economic blow of Western sanctions in 2022 (Yakovlev 2023). While Russia's technocrats and its business community are not immune to Kremlin propaganda, they also understand that Putin's actions have massively harmed Russia's economic interests. This could make them receptive to an offer from the West.

Finally, there is Russia's population. While opinion polls continue to show that nominal support for the war remains high, a recent in-depth sociological study found that much of this support is due to people being too afraid or exhausted to take a political stand against the war, rather than being convinced that fighting a war with Ukraine is a good idea (Nasarec 2023). A recent survey experiment similarly found that Russians are much more concerned about economic stagnation and decline than they are about Russia's geopolitical role in the world (Rochlitz et al. 2022). While Russia's population is too atomized and lacks the political organization to take an active role for now, it might also—at least in theory—be receptive to a charm offensive from the West.

### What Might a Western Strategy for Russia Look Like?

One of the reasons respondents were afraid of a Russian defeat was a feeling that “the whole world is against us” (Nasarec 2023). This is a dangerous situation, but it is also an understandable outcome of Russian propaganda and Western sanctions. To counter this, the West would have to reach out to Russia's population, as well as its technocratic administrations and its business community, with a clear signal that the goal of the sanctions is not to destroy Russia, but to end Putin's murderous war of aggression. One option, for example—in addition to a Marshall Plan for the large-scale reconstruction of Ukraine—would be a plan to reintegrate Russia into the European economic system. This plan would have to be equipped with the necessary political weight and financial credibility to send a clear signal to Russia's population and pro-business forces in Russia: Russia has the possibility of a successful economic future alongside Europe, and it is Putin and his war alone that stand in the way of such a common future.

#### About the Author

Michael Rochlitz is Professor of Institutional Economics at the University of Bremen. His research focuses on the political economy of Russia and China and examines the effect of authoritarian political institutions on economic growth and innovation.

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## Party Politics in Russia: Two and a Half Scenarios

Jan Matti Dollbaum (University of Bremen)

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The conditions for institutionalized political competition in Russia have further deteriorated in recent years. Since 2021, the Russian regime has been on a trajectory from an “informational autocracy” (Guriev/Treisman 2022) to a more classical, repressive authoritarian regime. In a broad campaign that began before the full-scale invasion, the authorities have dismantled or outlawed oppositional organizations and the remaining independent media, have imprisoned or driven into exile virtually all prominent politicians of the non-systemic opposition, and have effectively introduced war censorship. Harnessing advanced technological solutions, the authorities in Moscow have created one of the most sophisticated systems of facial recognition, and the Kremlin recently pushed through “Fan ID,” a contested system of digital profiles of football fans, who had been one of the last uncontrolled organized collectives. Further to these general restrictions and increases in surveillance, the authorities have done much to undermine Alexey Navalny’s Smart Voting project, an idea that might have come to the rescue of party politics, as it increased the value of campaigning under a clearly identifiable opposition-party brand. Finally, the introduction of electronic voting has increased the potential for electoral falsifications to a whole new level.

Of no less importance are the signals that parties themselves have been sending to show that they have understood the signs of the times. All parliamentary parties except for “New People,” a pro-business party with purported Kremlin connections, have joined the choir of extreme nationalism, routinely spreading anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda, and moving domestic politics, where they have more scope to criti-

cize the government, to the back burner. Leonid Slutsky, leader of the LDPR since Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s death in 2022, has even suggested merging all opposition parties into a “party of victory” that would support “the implementation of the president’s sound instructions.” Gennady Zyuganov has made similar comments about a “Party of Russia” to which all “patriotic” forces would belong. Given all of the above, one might legitimately ask: is there room for any kind of party politics in Russia’s future?

### Scenario 1: GDR-ization

The first scenario, as recently outlined by journalist and political observer Andrei Pertsev (2023), might be called “GDR-ization.” In this scenario, the parties would retain their formal labels (Putin has often criticized the single-party character of the Soviet regime) but would lose any trace of real—and, importantly, self-professed—autonomy, instead openly presenting themselves as a unified force of support for Putin and the state. In Pertsev’s short outline, the party system would have to be understood as a single political organism composed of actors that (profess to) represent different segments of the population but do not—even formally—engage in competition. In this scenario, elections are not focal points of contention or even a façade thereof, but rather moments of demonstrated societal unity.

A clear sign of such GDR-ization is that Putin himself seems to view it this way. In his address to the Federal Assembly in February 2023, he thanked all parliamentary parties for putting their disagreements behind them and helping the “patriotic movement,” including by providing supplies for the front. The model also

exists outside Putin's head. Supporting the statements of party leaders above, Pertsev cites a *Kommersant* piece noting that Duma's main task is the "legislative accompaniment" of the Ukraine invasion, with Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin declaring: "Regarding the special military operation, colleagues, we are in full agreement." A real change in the party system (for which GDR-ization may or may not be an appropriate term) would require more than a collection of statements. But it may well be that something *is* changing, and it is a fruitful task of empirical research to systematize this change.

### Scenario 2: Reignited Party Competition

Even if not very likely at this point, there is a counter-scenario to the ever-closer union of Russian parliamentary parties. This argument comes from the path-dependent incentives generated by established party structures—however hollow they might be at the moment—in an overall volatile situation. Suppose that the overbearing dominance of President Putin begins to fade, perhaps because military defeat or economic decline erode people's willingness to tolerate him, or simply because he decides to step down. As is common in such situations, elites will begin placing their bets on a potential successor. If, in this process, they turn to the public arena in their attempts to establish new "pyramids" of power (Hale 2014) or to reshuffle existing ones, it would be rational for them to seek to capture parties and their established organizational structures.

It is difficult to provide evidence for this scenario because it relies upon a counterfactual: a decisive negative turn in Putin's ability to be an effective projection screen for the public and the central arbiter of elites. However, there is ample historical precedent for this in 1990s Russia, and some instances of party capture by

regional elites still occur (in the current context, however, without much consequence). Moreover, the fact that Evgeny Prigozhin has recently signaled interest in taking over the St. Petersburg branch of Just Russia—For Truth shows that to individuals with political aims, parties may appear as appropriate vehicles—just in case they might be needed in the future.

### Conclusions

In the short term, a middle ground between these scenarios is the most likely. Full-fledged GDR-ization seems unattractive both for the regime and for the opposition parties. As long as subnational elections are being held, federal parties cannot fully assimilate if they want to retain some credibility and room for maneuver in their regional races. Meanwhile, for the regime, a party like the KPRF, which votes against the government from time to time, is likely preferable to a fully controlled one because its seeming independence makes its patriotic utterances appear more genuine.

Fundamental change in the direction of scenario 2 is, however, also unlikely: Putin's hold on power has not yet been endangered, despite all predictions that the war would spell "the beginning of the end of his regime." Indeed, sanctions have tied business even more closely to the state, while Putin has so far managed to thwart horizontal elite coordination by exploiting and furthering mutual mistrust, thus exacerbating their collective action problem. Consequently, parties might well continue to exist in their half-autonomous state, as nobody has the incentive to change a system that is still running. As Prigozhin's example suggests, however, some people might already be preparing for the future. As soon as things start moving, therefore, they might move quickly.

#### About the Author

*Jan Matti Dollbaum* is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Bremen. Starting in October 2023, he will lead a junior research group on party politics in post-Soviet Eastern Europe at LMU Munich.

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**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: [laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de](mailto:laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de) • Internet: [www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html](http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html)