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Assessing Russian Public Opinion on the Ukraine War

By Kseniya Kizilova (World Value Survey Association) and Pippa Norris (Harvard University)

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Abstract

How do ordinary Russians really feel about Putin's decision to invade Ukraine? Although some suggest that the early polls—showing about 60% support for the war—can be treated as genuine signals of Russian public opinion, this article explores a number of reasons why these poll results should be treated with great caution or even discounted. These include state censorship; self-censorship and response bias; the existence of protests even in the authoritarian Russian context; and the fact that some of the early polls were asking about a hypothetical invasion that many Russians might not have given much thought. However, the article argues that the most plausible explanation for apparent initial support for the war lies in the manipulation of public opinion through state control of communication channels and the widespread use of censorship, propaganda, and disinformation at home and abroad.

The long-term outcome of Putin's bloody invasion of Ukraine will depend not only on hard power, but also on soft power (winning hearts and minds at home and abroad). Soft power, in turn, depends on cultural attitudes and information streams flowing through legacy airwaves, digital platforms, and personal networks.

Surveys conducted immediately before and after the outbreak of the Ukrainian invasion on February 24 report that the majority of ordinary Russians expressed support for the Ukrainian war and for President Putin. Overall, across the series of initial polls, a “silent majority”—about 60% of Russian respondents—said that they endorsed the “special military operation” in Ukraine.

But are these results reliable indicators of Russian views prior to the invasion? In February and early March, did the majority of ordinary Russians actually sympathize with Putin's decision to declare war?

History will ultimately decide how much of the responsibility for initiating the bloodshed rests on Vladimir Putin alone, as well as on his Kremlin acolytes, and how much blame can be laid on the tacit acceptance of ordinary Russians. It is important to determine this issue both morally, to assess culpability for the conflict, and legally, to prosecute potential war crimes. Understanding Putin's soft power can also provide insights into the long-term consequences of the conflict for his leadership and for the future of both countries.

The early polls, like surveys elsewhere, can be treated as genuine signals of Russian public opinion. After all, cultural attitudes of nationalism, patriotism, and support for strong leaders remain powerful forces in the world. Many Russian citizens may have no idea of what is happening in their name and form their opinions solely on the basis of pictures on Russian state TV. State propaganda and fake news about Ukraine “shooting its own citizens in Donbass” started back in 2014 and have

since been increasing in both pace and volume. Even if ordinary Russians are badly misinformed, however, the early polls may still capture *authentic* attitudes of support for Putin's actions among a silent majority at home, and thus represent the social construction of reality in modern Russia.

At the same time, there are several potential arguments that the results from the early polls should be treated with great caution—or perhaps even discounted.

State Censorship and Biased Pollsters?

One argument is that many Russian market research organizations, including VCIOM and FOM, are state-controlled and thus their surveys are far from equivalent to reputable independent polls by, say, Gallup, IPSOS or YouGov. This could indeed be an issue. Yet the results of several early surveys by different polling agencies, while far from identical, appear to suggest that in the initial phase, at least, the invasion was supported by the *majority* of the Russian public.

The most reputable public opinion data available in Russia come from the Levada Center, a non-governmental research organization that has been conducting regular surveys since 1988. Levada surveys on February 17–21 found that the majority of respondents (52%) felt negatively towards Ukraine. Most (60%) blamed the US and NATO for the escalation of tensions in Eastern Ukraine, while only 4% blamed Russia. The Levada polls suggest that net public approval of Putin surged by about 13 percentage points between December and February, when almost three-quarters (71%) of the population expressed approval of his leadership, presumably reflecting a rally-round-the-flag effect.

These were not isolated results. Even stronger sentiments were recorded in a pre-war poll conducted February 7–15 for CNN in Russia by a British agency,

Savanta ComRes, in which half (50%) of respondents agreed that “it would be right for Moscow to use military force to prevent Kyiv from joining NATO.” Two-thirds of Russians (64%) surveyed said that Russians and Ukrainians were “one people,” a position taught in the Soviet era and a view that Vladimir Putin has been pushing, compared to just 28% of Ukrainians. In their survey of February 25–27, VCIOM reported finding strong support for the “special military operation” in Ukraine, with two-thirds (68%) of respondents in favor, around one-quarter (22%) against, and only 10% unable to provide an answer. FOM showed that 65% of respondents to a February 25–27 survey supported the “launch of Russia’s special military operation.” A private survey agency, Russian Field, reported that 58.8% of respondents to polls conducted from February 26 to 28 supported “Russian military action in Ukraine.” Finally, the Washington Post reported a poll conducted a week into the assault by a consortium of researchers that confirmed that the majority of Russians (58%) approved of the invasion, while only a quarter (23%) opposed it.

Clearly, not all Russians supported the war prior to the outbreak of conflict, but overall, a majority of about 60% did, according to different measures by different polls. If a common bias influences the results of all the private and state-controlled survey organizations, then it may well be impossible to marshal any systematic and genuine evidence of Russian public opinion either for or against the war.

Self-Censorship and Response Bias?

Another possible reason for any potential bias could be self-censorship by respondents, which might generate inauthentic replies and response bias. Citizens living in repressive states may avoid expressing dissenting views in survey interviews involving sensitive issues to avoid the risk of their opinions being reported to state authorities.

This claim may also be valid. Even in Western countries it is often difficult to establish respondents’ true views on certain moral topics—such as those concerning risky sexual behavior, the overt expression of racism, sexism, and homophobia, or even their turnout to vote—as respondents may be reluctant to express their views when questioned directly for fear of social sanction. These difficulties are compounded when monitoring attitudes toward the authorities in repressive states that lack human rights and freedom of expression. Survey list experiments are designed to detect hidden biases. Some studies using this technique to measure Putin’s popularity have found only modest response biases. Others, including studies in China, have detected more substantial practices of self-censorship. Our own (forthcoming) list experiments in the World Values Survey suggest varied degrees of bias in expressing support for their

own leader across diverse authoritarian states like Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and Iran. Yet even if some Russians self-censor, it remains doubtful if even the most generous estimates of response bias could reverse the balance of public opinion reported in many of the early polls favoring the use of military force in Ukraine.

Protests and Dissent

Another view suggests that a more reliable guide to “genuine” Russian attitudes may be garnered from the exodus of dissenters and the outbreak of mass street protests and civil disobedience. Human rights groups report widespread anti-war protests in cities across the country despite the harsh police crackdown and the risks of serious injury and imprisonment. Thousands of anti-war demonstrators have been arrested to date. Thousands more Russians have fled abroad.

But the claim that dissenters express the underlying genuine views of most ordinary Russians may reflect Western hopes more than reality. Activists constitute an atypical cross-section of the general population in most countries, even in liberal democracies without constraints on the freedom to demonstrate peacefully. The “silent majority” is unlikely to engage.

Hypothetical Questions and Fluid Opinion

Further doubts about the reliability of Russian polls may arise in relation to the meaning of survey responses on hypothetical issues where public opinion remains fluid and vague. This process can generate “top of the head” answers that tick the interviewer’s boxes without most people probably having given the matter much thought.

The early polls are just that. Attitudes are likely to become firmer over time, although the direction of any response depends on cultural values and the attribution of blame. Whether Russian attitudes persist as events unfold remains an open question, particularly as soldiers come home in body-bags, economic sanctions bite even harder, personal messages flow across borders, and the strength of Ukrainian resistance becomes evident. Dramatic shifts in public and elite opinion have occurred around the world following the historic events in Ukraine and the accompanying blanket media coverage, which has shared heart-rending images of refugees and of cities flattened to rubble, speeches by President Zelensky, and moving interviews with ordinary Ukrainians. The impact of war coverage globally has been reflected in dramatic policy changes to military funding and perceptions of the importance of security in NATO member states (especially Germany) and the EU. But its impact on domestic opinion in Russia depends on prior cultural attitudes, especially fatalism toward the authorities and the powerful forces of nationalism, as well as efforts to access the available informa-

tion, such as by using VPNs. Even if opposition gradually grows, however, subsequent polls cannot be read backwards as an indication of Russian opinion at the time of the invasion.

“Brainwashing”

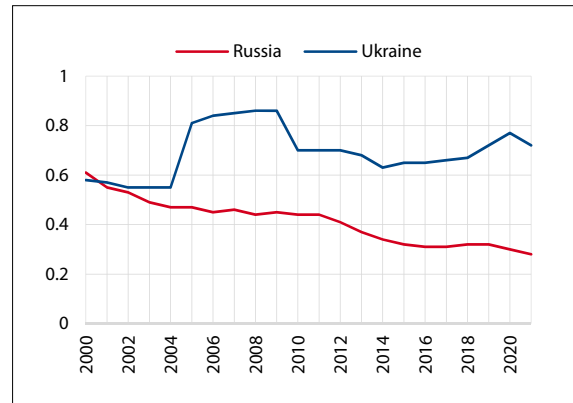
The final and most plausible explanation for the initial polls reporting Russian support for the war lies in the manipulation of public opinion through state control of communication channels and the widespread use of censorship, propaganda, and disinformation at home and abroad.

Reports suggest that Russians have dismissed the word of friends and relatives living in Ukraine with first-hand experience of the war. Instead, Russians suggest that the Ukrainian army attacked its own population in “false flag” operations and then sought to pin the blame on Putin, following the orders of a Ukrainian government full of “neo-fascists,” “nationalists,” and “drug addicts.” This “official” account of the events, formulated by Putin’s regime, has been widely disseminated on state TV. Information shared by Ukrainian or international media is labelled as “fake,” while graphic images of flattened Ukrainian cities are described as “manipulated.”

State control of the media has been growing under Putin for many years, and this process has accelerated sharply in recent weeks. The Varieties of Democracy project publishes a freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index that reflects the extent to which the government respects press and media freedom. Since 2000, the index has steadily plummeted in Russia while remaining higher in Ukraine by comparison. The latest crackdown has greatly tightened Putin’s censorship: a new law means that journalists providing military information deemed false by the state could face jail sentences of up to 15 years; many international news corporations, like CNN and the BBC, suspended their operations, while the remaining independent media outlets in Russia have been shuttered. Even before these events, in 2021 Russia ranked 150th out of 180 countries worldwide in press freedom, according to *Reporters without Borders*.

But modern, well-educated, middle-class Russians, particularly tech-savvy younger generations, have not yet become as isolated and rigidly controlled as populations living in Turkmenistan, Eritrea, and North Korea. To counter censorship, Russians can still use Virtual Private Networks (VPN) to gain access to international news—and indeed demand has surged. But access takes effort and technical know-how. Evidence from the latest World Values Survey, conducted in Russia in 2018 and Ukraine in 2020, indicates that two-thirds of Russians still use television as their primary source of daily news

Figure 1: Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index



Source: Varieties of Democracies dataset 2021; see also Table 1 overleaf.

and only a minority rely on the Internet. By contrast, in Ukraine, an almost equal number of people now get their news from the Internet as receive it from TV.

Among Russian Internet users, even before recent state bans on international platforms like Facebook and Twitter, many relied on domestic sources. According to Wave 3 of the Eurasia Barometer (EAB), conducted in November 2021, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, both Russian social media platforms, were widely used at home. Ukrainians used Western/international social media far more than Russians.

Most importantly, we find that use of TV and the Internet predict Russian political attitudes, *but in divergent directions*. The Eurasia Barometer survey, founded in 1989, provides one of the most authoritative and reliable sources of academic data. The survey monitors trust in the President and assessments of Russia’s influence on the world. In general, in November 2021 Russia’s role in the world was viewed positively by about 81% of respondents in Russia and only 14% in Ukraine. Trust in their own leader stood at 59% in Russia and just 35% in Ukraine.

After controlling for standard background characteristics, watching TV news was positively linked with Russian trust in Putin, and positive perceptions of Russia’s role in the world. By contrast, using the Internet and social media in Russia produces the opposite pattern: less trust in Putin and more negative views of Russia’s influence. The impact of radio and newspaper use is more mixed. This process is likely to work as a “virtuous circle”; self-selection of news sources and the effects of exposure connect use of the media with political attitudes.

The impact of online resources and social media diverge sharply in the two countries. In Russia, state propaganda on television and censorship of independent social media have isolated the country and successfully brainwashed numerous citizens into obediently parroting the narratives “as heard on TV.” It requires some

effort for Russians to obtain and compare information from various sources. It requires far more sacrifice for ordinary citizens to stand up and publicly express dissent from the authorities. It is easiest for all of us to blame Putin, his Kremlin acolytes, and the security forces for the carnage, rubble, and bloodshed in this war of choice. But even passive public support (as expressed in polls) for Putin's decision to invade Ukraine means that, as with Hitler's "willing executioners," broader culpability for the subsequent catastrophe in both countries is shared by the silent majority of ordinary Russians.

In Ukraine, by contrast, the flood of real-time videos across Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and other social media networks has become a major source of information about the cruelty of Putin's ruthless actions toward their country and exposed Moscow's propaganda, both at home and abroad. The direct voices of the Ukrainian people—not least through interviews with numerous fluent English-speakers, refugees, and official spokespersons—have been heard all over the world. All Ukrainian settlements share constantly updated live information through Telegram channels and WhatsApp groups about the ongoing shelling and fire alarms, gains and losses among Ukrainian forces and the civilian population, the schedule for pharmacies and supermarkets, available humanitarian and medical help, and much more. Thousands of videos of the conflict are disseminated on a daily basis. Social media have thereby helped to coordinate Ukrainian defense, evacuation, and humanitarian activities at home, while the whole world watches the conflict live and in real time.

In an attempt to curb this process, Moscow has sought to export well-established fake news and disinformation practices to Ukraine. In early March, the TV towers in Kyiv and Kharkiv were attacked. The broadcasting tower was seized by the Russian invaders in Kherson, with local TV and radio channels switched to Russia-promoting video and audio messages. The Russian-appointed "acting mayor" of Melitopol has urged that local people switch to Russian TV channels for

"more reliable" information. These strategies are designed to impose a false narrative around Russia's invasion into Ukraine, as well as revising the whole history of Ukraine-Russia relations.

Lessons from the Information Wars

Several polls from diverse polling organizations have reported that the silent majority of Russians—roughly 60%—initially favored the use of force in Ukraine, and polls registered rising support for Putin. Many factors may help to explain these results. Putin's domestic control rests on hard power, namely harsh coercion of opponents, like the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny. But it also depends on soft power, notably prior cultural values and feelings of nationalism reinforced by state control of television news and newspapers since the gradual crackdown on the free press in recent decades, which has been accelerated by the recent draconian restrictions on independent channels. Official censorship has aggressively throttled independent sources of news about Ukraine. Self-censorship is likely to have reinforced a spiral of silence in society, with perceptions of majority support amplifying official propaganda while silencing critics.

The Ukrainian conflict, like other modern conflicts, involves a complex combination of hard-power military force and soft-power information wars. So far on the world stage, following the unprovoked attack on a sovereign nation, the moral clarity of Ukrainian refugees, and the bravery of the resistance, Ukraine has achieved an overwhelming victory in soft power worldwide. This is exemplified by the almost universal condemnation and call for unconditional withdrawal expressed by member states in the UN General Assembly. But unless that message also penetrates hearts and minds at home throughout Russia, sparking active dissent and domestic outrage against the war wrecking both countries, it is powerless to challenge Putin's rule. In the interim, while the free world watches in horror, hard power continues to turn Ukrainian cities into rubble.

About the Authors

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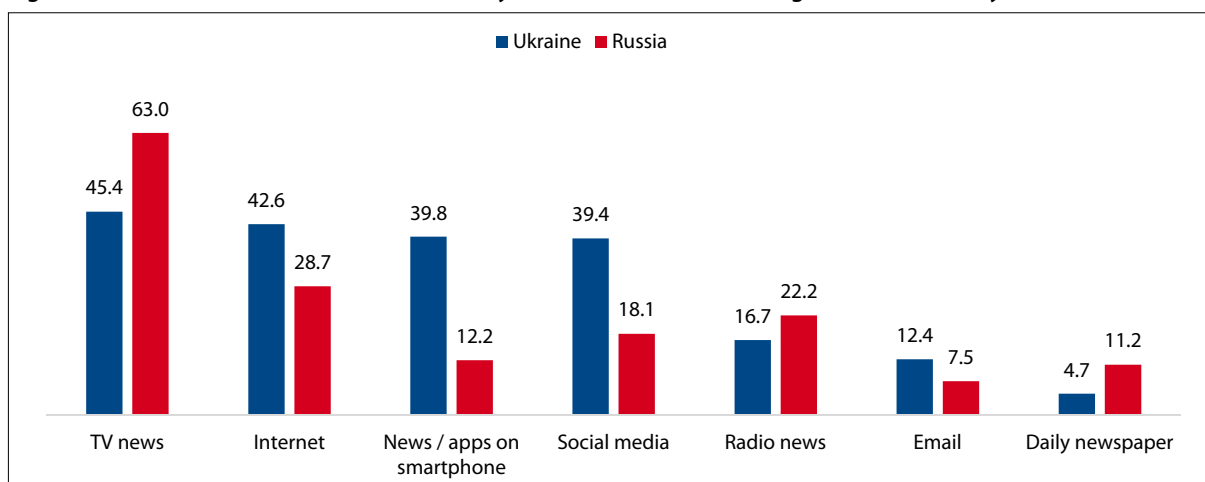
Appendix: Tables and Graphs

Table 1: Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Russia	0.61	0.55	0.53	0.49	0.47	0.47	0.45	0.46	0.44	0.45	0.44
Ukraine	0.58	0.57	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.81	0.84	0.85	0.86	0.86	0.70
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Russia	0.44	0.41	0.37	0.34	0.32	0.31	0.31	0.32	0.32	0.30	0.28
Ukraine	0.70	0.70	0.68	0.63	0.65	0.65	0.66	0.67	0.72	0.77	0.72

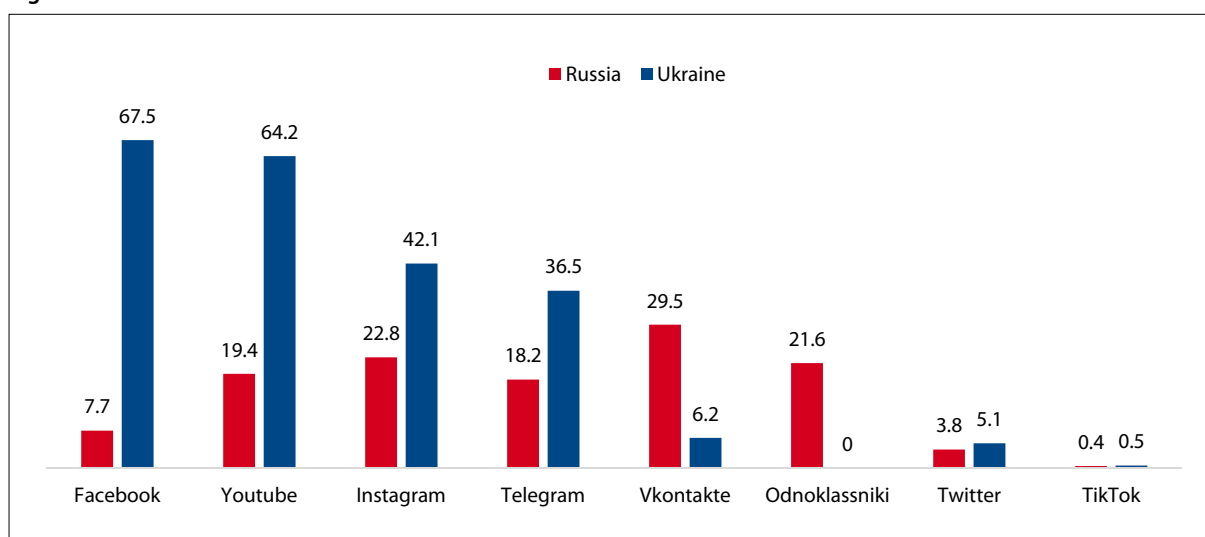
Source: Varieties of Democracies dataset 2021.

Figure 2: Information Sources Used on a Daily Basis to Learn What Is Going on in Your Country



Source: World Values Survey wave 7 (2018–2021), N=1289 in Ukraine; N=1810 in Russia.

Figure 3: Use of Social Media in Ukraine and Russia



Source: Eurasia Barometer wave 3 (Nov 2021), N=1509 in Ukraine; N=1205 in Russia. Shares of users are calculated using all those interviewed as the baseline. In both countries, about 16% of respondents reported that they "never" use social networks, including because they have no access to the Internet.

Table 2: Media Sources and Political Perceptions in Russia

	Trust in the President (4 pt)			Russia's influence on the world (6 pt)			
	Beta	Std. Beta	Sig	Beta	Std. Beta	Sig	
MEDIA SOURCES							
TV news	0.405	0.196	***	0.316	0.147	***	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Internet and social media	-0.334	-0.150	***	-0.383	-0.165	***	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Daily newspapers	0.327	0.064	**	-	-	-	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Radio	-	-	-	-0.256	-0.054	*	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
CONTROLS							
Socioeconomic status	0.098	0.172	***	0.067	0.112	***	Subjective SES: 10 pt
Age	0.007	0.127	***	0.004	0.062	**	Numeric variable (18-99)
Sex (male)	-0.119	-0.057	**	-	-	-	Male (1)/Female (0)
Education	-	-	-	-0.045	-0.080	**	Education: 10 pt
Adjusted R2	0.178			0.121			

Dataset: Eurasia Barometer wave 3 in Russia (N=1205; November 2021)

ANALYSIS

The Russian Invasion in the Context of Post-Bolotnaya Authoritarian Consolidation

By Seongcheol Kim (University of Kassel / WZB Berlin Social Science Center)

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine came as a shock to many observers, including the author of this article. In terms of domestic political dynamics, the invasion is inscribed in—and has drastically intensified—the logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation, as notably seen in the performative staging of Vladimir Putin's decision to invade as a response to demands supposedly present in wider society. A key part of this is the co-optation of the Greater Russia nationalism, represented by the likes of Igor Strelkov, as a driving force behind the 2014 Russian intervention in the Donbas.

From Putin I to Bolotnaya

In addressing the key question of “how we got here,” it is worth recalling how the Kremlin's constructions of the relationship between the state, political opposition, and wider society have evolved over time. Vladimir Putin's rise to the presidency in 2000 was followed by a far-reaching process of elite consolidation and co-optation around the new ruling party United

Russia, including (and indeed most ostentatiously) in formerly restive republics such as Chechnya. In the process, institutionalized practices of “managing dissent” (Robertson 2011) were put in place, including the establishment of a consultative “Public Chamber” of largely regime-loyal civil society organizations; the creation of de facto pro-Kremlin parties within the “systemic opposition” (most notably Just Russia)

alongside existing ones (most notably LDPR); and various forms of descriptive representation for “systemic opposition” parties within state institutions, including the appointment of Yabloko co-founder Vladimir Lukin as Human Rights Ombudsman (2004–14) and Just Russia (formerly Russian Party of Life) leader Sergei Mironov’s stint as chairman of the upper house of parliament (2001–11).

As part of the Kremlin’s strategy of co-opting opposition and nurturing regime-friendly intermediary organizations, the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi was founded in 2005 as a vehicle for staging pro-government rallies and projecting the image of youth masses loyal to the regime. For example, in the context of the controversy surrounding the relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn, Nashi staged demonstrations outside the Estonian Embassy, accusing the Estonian authorities of promoting “fascism”—a notable instance of the term “fascism” being constructed to refer to perceived anti-Russian or anti-Soviet sentiment, especially in other post-Soviet republics.

The “For Fair Elections” protests following the 2011 Duma elections—which presented by far the biggest challenge to United Russia rule up to that point (Gabowitsch 2016)—marked a turning point in the Kremlin’s approach to managing dissent. The incidents on Bolotnaya Square during the May 2012 “March of Millions” against Putin’s inauguration for a third (non-consecutive) term as president became a pretext for a large-scale crackdown on opposition activists in the so-called “Bolotnaya case,” leading to a slew of prosecutions and prison sentences. In addition to this more uncompromising line against organized opposition, the Kremlin cut back on attempts to establish a pro-regime civil society, effectively disbanding Nashi (the ineffectiveness of which had been exposed in the 2011–13 protests). Instead, the period since around 2013 has been characterized by an increasingly strident national-conservative identity politics mediated via the figure of Putin as a central locus of power that directly takes up various demands present in wider society—not least among fringe far-right groups. An early instance of this was the so-called “gay propaganda law” of 2013, which was predicated on a supposed link between opposition to homosexuality and the protection of children—at a time when “Occupy Pedophilia,” an anti-LGBT vigilante group established by neo-fascists, was getting heightened attention with its attacks on gay men in the name of fighting “pedophilia.” In this vein, the post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation has entailed not only increased repression of the organized opposition, but also a pronounced social-authoritarian turn on cultural issues: the 2020 constitutional referendum, for

instance, not only enacted the resetting (*obnulenie*) of Putin’s term ledger, but also constitutionally enshrined a definition of marriage as possible only between a man and a woman.

From Bolotnaya to Donbas

In the sphere of foreign policy, the 2014 annexation of Crimea constituted the initial peak of this post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation. The ensuing pro-Putin “patriotic consensus” encompassed not only the entire spectrum of the “systemic opposition” in parliament (KPRF, Just Russia, LDPR), but also various irredentist-nationalist schools of thought within Russian society, including Eduard Limonov’s National Bolshevism, Aleksandr Dugin’s neo-Eurasianism, and Igor Strelkov’s Greater Russia monarchism. What all of these loosely organized ideological subcultures had in common (with the partial exception of Dugin) was their political marginality and distance from the state—indeed, their status as radically “non-systemic” phenomena that the Kremlin had shown relatively little interest in co-opting. Most notably, Limonov took on a leading role in late-2000s opposition protests such as the Dissenters’ Marches and Strategy-31; the title of one of Limonov’s books, “Another Russia,” was re-fashioned as a broadly anti-Putin protest slogan that figured prominently in the Dissenters’ Marches (“We need another Russia, a Russia without Putin”). With the annexation of Crimea, however, Limonov became an ardent supporter of Putin’s foreign policy.

In the context of the Russian intervention in Crimea and the Donbas, it was Igor Strelkov (né Girkin) who took on a pivotal role, leading a group of militants who seized the administration building in Sloviansk in Donetsk Oblast in April 2014. Strelkov represents a monarchist-militarist brand of Greater Russia nationalism—a strain that has always existed in post-Soviet Russian politics, with one notable early example being Alexander Lebed, a military officer who commanded Russian troops in the Transnistria War and was considered a serious challenger for the presidency in the mid-1990s. Strelkov’s Greater Russia nationalism—as expressed in numerous interviews since 2014—consists in the belief that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians constitute one nation, separated only by regional differences and artificially distinct state entities, whose unity needs to be defended and indeed restored by force. Strelkov fought in the Transnistria, Bosnia, and First and Second Chechen Wars, claiming to have left for Transnistria with his three-line rifle the day after defending his history diploma in order to “defend the Russian people.” Despite his past as an FSB officer, Strelkov claims to have no interest in institutionalized politics in Russia and to only have supported Putin in 2014 in

the hope that the latter would complete the “reunification of the Russian nation” throughout the rest of Ukraine following the annexation of Crimea. Following his departure from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic—for reasons that he has refused to disclose—Strelkov founded the “Novorossiya Movement” and later the “January 25 Committee” as an alliance of irredentist-nationalist groupings (including Limonov’s Another Russia), in both cases as oppositional movements pursuing the goal of a “reunification of the Russian people” that had supposedly been betrayed by the Minsk Agreements.

In the fateful spring of 2014, Strelkov’s intervention in Sloviansk ensured that the Kremlin’s far-reaching co-optation of domestic opposition and mobilization of nationalist sentiment would not simply end with the annexation of Crimea. The myth of the unredeemed “Russian Donbas” served as a point of convergence for restless irredentist-nationalist groupings of all stripes that had always been ready to advocate the use of military force to resolve the post-Soviet national question—namely, the fact of millions of purportedly ethnic Russians stranded beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Strelkov himself used his frequent interviews after 2014 to argue that a large-scale war with Ukraine was unavoidable in light of the armed struggle that had already begun in the Donbas to reclaim what was historically rightfully Russian. It was this morally and doctrinally charged argument that would be co-opted with a vengeance by Putin and the Kremlin in the run-up to the 2022 invasion.

Staging the Invasion

Putin’s July 2021 essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” amounted to an adoption of Greater Russia nationalist doctrine by the president himself. Notably, Putin argued in the essay that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians constitute a single nation that had been artificially divided over the centuries following the principle of “divide and rule”—culminating in the Soviet policy of “Ukrainization” in the 1920s and ultimately giving rise to modern Ukraine as a “full and complete offspring of the Soviet period.” In his speech on recognizing the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics in February 2022, Putin reiterated the claim that Ukraine was “created by Russia, more precisely by Bolshevik, communist Russia,” by the “ripping away” (*ottorzhenie*) from Russia of a part of its integral territory. In this manner, Putin reproduced an ambivalence characteristic of Greater Russia nationalism *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union as a fundamentally Russian entity (and one with agency over Ukraine), yet one that suppressed Russian nationhood in the process. In constructing the historical tearing-apart of the Russian nation as

a violent process that took place from above—over the heads of “the people,” as it were—and culminated in the “genocide” of the past eight years, Putin created a justification for Russian aggression as a form of counter-violence in reaction to, and indeed redressing, a long history of injustices against Russia.

The immediate prelude to the February 2022 invasion cast in stark relief the performative practice of Putin simply taking up demands that are supposedly rooted in wider society, including the opposition. The Duma resolution on recognizing the DNR and LNR was initiated by the KPRF; following the adoption of the resolution on February 15, Putin initially responded by remarking at a press conference that the actions of MPs are motivated by “the opinion of their voters” and that it is first necessary to exhaust the “possibilities for implementing the Minsk Agreements” (which he proceeded to declare exhausted in subsequent interventions)—as if he was being forced by public opinion to move in a more radical direction than he himself would have preferred. To borrow the words of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Putin’s claim was that “the sword has been forced into our hands”—not only by the enemy, but also by domestic public opinion. In this manner, the staging of the invasion was inscribed in the peculiar logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation: every expansion of the state’s authority (in this case, by means of drastic military aggression)—and every restriction of the scope for organized opposition as a result—is justified by an organic link between Putin and deeper social sentiment.

The repercussions of the invasion for domestic opposition in Russia have followed a largely predictable pattern: public expressions of anti-war sentiment—including media outlets covering the war as a war and as a Russian invasion—have been systematically suppressed, while the entire spectrum of “systemic opposition” parties, nationalists of all stripes, and even the Left Front as a self-styled “left-patriotic opposition” have (with a few exceptions) more or less fallen into line. Strelkov, notably, has used his communication platforms to offer his own analyses of the military situation, while supporting the invasion with an air of vindication (calling it “better late than never”). The heightened repression in recent years against Alexei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation, as well as NGOs such as Memorial, has done its part to neutralize potential structures and outlets for mobilizing anti-war dissent. In a perverse way, the Kremlin has now achieved the greatest co-optation or elimination of organized opposition ever seen in post-Soviet Russia, even if (privately held) public sentiment against the war turns out to be higher than the 20–25% gauged in opinion polls thus far.

Conclusion

In reconstructing the Russian decision to invade Ukraine, it is necessary to understand how it is inscribed in the logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation. To be clear, this by no means makes it a justifiable, or indeed inevitable, outcome of Russian politics under Putin. It does, however, make it difficult to envision a scenario in which the Kremlin backs down from the ongoing military aggression within the logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation and the drastic escalation of the latter occasioned

by the invasion. Even if a peace deal with concessions from both sides is reached, the genie has been let out of the bottle—as it was in 2014—in the form of the myth of the unredeemed reunification of the “Russian nation” and, this time around, its elevation to the status of *raison d'état*. Even in the hypothetical scenario of regime change within Russia leading to a halt in military aggression against Ukraine, the genie is likely to live on as a shadow haunting would-be future administrations and as a weapon in the hands of radical nationalists.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

The Fog of War and Power Dynamics in Russia's Elite: Defections and Purges, or Simply Wishful Thinking?

By Fabian Burkhardt (Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg)

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Collapse of the Putin Regime as Wishful Thinking?

“For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power,” President Joe Biden said during his speech on Saturday 27 March, 2022, in the Polish capital, Warsaw. The White House later sought to clarify that Biden's remarks referred to Putin's exercise of power in countries neighboring Russia, not to regime change. While the U.S. administration has made it clear on multiple occasions that it does not seek regime change in Rus-

sia, Biden's apparent slip of the tongue reflects widespread wishful thinking about a possible domestic effect of Russia's war on Ukraine: the eventual toppling of Putin.

In theory, this makes sense. Over the course of Russian history, major wars such as the Crimean War (1853–1856), the Russo-Japanese War (1904/05), and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) have had a major impact on Russia domestically. Moreover, comparative research indicates that starting a war

is risky for authoritarian leaders if the proclaimed aims of the war are not achieved, as this increases the chances that regime outsiders—that is, elites outside the coalition responsible for launching the war—will attempt to stage a coup against the leader whose war is failing.

Certainly, one month into the war, it is far too soon to draw far-flung conclusions about domestic outcomes for the Putin regime. The war is definitely not going according to plan, and early monitoring of elite dynamics suggests that some behind-the-scenes turmoil and minor cracks in the elite can indeed be discerned. But as of the time of writing, there appears to be no indication of immediate danger either to Putin's rule or to the regime as a whole.

Swiftly Progressing Regime Personalization

Regime personalization has progressed rapidly since Vladimir Putin's fourth presidential term began in 2018. The 2020 constitutional amendment that would allow Putin to run again for president in 2024—as well as others further weakening the government, the judiciary, and federalism—went a long way toward eliminating the remaining formal constraints on the presidency. During the pandemic, Putin withdrew further from day-to-day domestic policymaking; personal meetings with key elites in government, as well as state and private enterprises, were significantly reduced and face-to-face interaction was limited to a select circle of military figures, security services personnel, and ideologists such as Iurii Kovalchuk. The most visible demonstration of this highly personalist authoritarian rule was the extended meeting of the Russian Security Council on 21 February, which was even broadcast on television. The formal topic of the meeting was Russia's recognition of the self-proclaimed "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states. In hindsight, however, it became obvious that Putin sought to demonstrate to Russia and the world that all of the 27 officials present supported—and were therefore complicit in—the war on Ukraine that would be declared on 24 February. The way Putin conducted the meeting illustrated that the Security Council was not, like the Soviet Politburo, a collective decision-making body; the decision to invade Ukraine had been clearly taken by Putin in advance, and only a minority of members had been informed what was expected of them. Some, such as chief of the Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin and presidential aide for Ukraine Dmitrii Kozak were even humiliated. Later reporting consistently indicated that Putin's inner circle for the decision to go to war consisted of Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, Chief of Staff of the Russian Army Valerii Gerasimov, and director of domestic intelligence Aleksandr

Bortnikov. Key pillars of the regime such as the economic bloc of the government, United Russia, state corporations and companies, oligarchs, and large swathes of the military and the National Guard were kept in the dark about the looming war. As the Russian elite was largely taken by surprise, initial discontent and despondence were widespread. The hermetic mode of decision-making was also conducive to engendering war optimism in Putin: personalist authoritarian rule gradually erodes feedback mechanisms from within and without the bureaucracy. The FSB and the military apparently provided Putin with heavily biased or even wrong information about Ukrainian military capabilities, statehood, and civic cohesion.

Minor Cracks at the Top, but No Elite Split

This element of surprise, as well as the scale and brutality of the Russian war effort in Ukraine, could have provided fertile ground for elite defections. One month into the war, defections have been limited and at best symbolic. The most prominent defector to date is Anatolii Chubais—the architect of Russia's privatization in the 1990s and the person who facilitated Putin's move from St. Petersburg to Moscow in 1997 by providing him with a position in the Presidential Administration. Chubais left Russia and was spotted in Istanbul, Putin having approved his dismissal by decree on 25 March. Chubais had been Putin's special envoy for climate and international cooperation but had long since ceased to be a power broker in the elite. Another notable critic of Russia's war, who even expressed empathy with the Ukrainian victims, is Arkadii Dvorkovich, the former deputy prime minister under Medvedev until 2018. As a result, Dvorkovich was forced to step down as chairman of the Skolkovo Foundation—once Medvedev's pet project for creating a Russian Silicon Valley—but while remaining in Russia, Dvorkovich retained an exit option outside the country as FIDE president.

These defections are certainly highly symbolic and demonstrate that the heuristic device of distinguishing between "systemic liberals" and "siloviki" appears to still be relevant: defection and covert dissent mainly stem from the economic bloc of government, and not from the military or security services. Notably, the war marked the culmination of Medvedev's move from the "systemic liberal" camp he championed as president from 2008 to 2012 to that of the "siloviki." As deputy chairman of the Security Council, he has employed war rhetoric so radical that even that of Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev, a noted hardliner, pales in comparison.

Yet even among the economic bloc, criticism is the exception to the rule. To counter the effects of Western sanctions, Putin has relied on cadre stability, reap-

pointing key officials and essentially freezing cadre reshuffles in the regions. Economic management has been entrusted to the government task force led by PM Mikhail Mishustin, deputy PM Andrei Belousov, and Moscow mayor Sergei Sobianin. The task force has essentially scaled up coordination mechanisms and policies already employed during the pandemic. Moreover, Putin renominated Elvira Nabiullina as governor of the Central Bank and Andrei Kostin as chairman of the state bank VTB for another five-year term. In his rant on 16 March about “national traitors” and the “fifth column” in Russia, Putin made it clear that a crack-down on “scum” working in the interests of the West was imminent. In this context, stepping down voluntarily or even defecting is interpreted by Putin as “treason.” The Russian leader has created a system of joint responsibility (*krugovaia poruka*) backed up by compromising material (*kompromat*) that is intended to prevent the leaking of state secrets to the broader public or even to secret services abroad. Moreover, given the context of wartime, Nabiullina—in contrast to Dvorkovich just a few years ago—does not have international exit options at such institutions as the IMF or the World Bank.

If one conceptualizes the Russian elite as a whole in concentric circles, then discontent or even—in rare cases—defection have mainly occurred in the outer circles. Beyond the federal executive, this pattern holds true for the economy: among the highest-ranking businessmen on Russia’s *Forbes* list, many have spoken out against the war, but it has been those business tycoons who either have most of their assets abroad or are resident outside Russia who have criticized the war most vocally (among them Oleg Tinkov, Pavel Durov, and the Bukhman brothers). Others have publicly spoken out in favor of a swift end to the war, a stance that appears to be motivated by having sustained huge losses due to the collapse of the Moscow stock exchange and sanctions; concern for their companies’ international reputation among investors; or both. Examples of this position are Lukoil’s Vagit Agitperov and Leonid Fedun, NLMK’s Vladimir Lisin, and Severstal’s Aleksei Mordashov. As highlighted by Alfa Group’s Mikhail Fridman—an early critic of the Russian war against Ukraine—any direct criticism of Putin would entail a direct threat to business operations and property rights in Russia. Hence, those tycoons who attended Putin’s meeting with members of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP) on 24 February have largely refrained from public commentary.

State corporations and state companies have largely remained silent in public and, as a rule, have addressed employees to prepare them for the coming economic difficulties due to sanctions (Sberbank). Some key trustees of Putin, however, doubled down on their support for

the war: Gazprom’s Aleksei Miller called upon employees to rally around the president and Rostec’s Sergei Chemezov said in an interview that Russia was compelled to carry out the “special operation” in order to avert a future attack by Ukraine on the “People’s Republics” and even on Russia itself.

Overall, it has been those oligarchs with private businesses who have been the most critical of the war. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to conclude that they might conspire to topple Putin in the short term: they have learned to play by the rules, they are usually more competitive than cooperative, and they fear the Putin-controlled security services and law enforcement.

In contrast to the relative stability at the top, discontent at the rank-and-file level could turn out to be challenging in the medium to long term, as these will be the personnel on whom the Kremlin will have to rely to keep the Putin regime afloat. On 25 February, 12 officers of the Krasnodar branch of the National Guard refused to obey the order to move into Ukraine and are now on trial. According to the officers’ lawyers, a similar refusal to obey orders occurred in numerous units from other regions, too. In conjunction with heavy battle losses, this raises doubts about the morale of National Guard units to suppress protesters in the event of a hypothetical national crisis such as mass protests or a coup attempt. Similarly, according to media reports, a lot of staff at Russia’s Central Bank fell into a state of hopelessness after the war started, leading to the departure of a substantial number of qualified bankers. Even state propaganda outlets saw a number of defections after the symbolic protest on live TV of Channel One editor Marina Ovsinnikova (RT’s Russian and international services had already experienced a number of resignations). This high-visibility protest triggered a wave of resignations by journalists for such state media as the VGTRK holding, Gazprom’s NTV, or the news agency Itar-Tass. With a mix of carrots (such as bonuses) and sticks, however, state media managers managed to contain the resignations. Despite its limited scale, this wave nevertheless suggests that the feeling of despondence about the war is likely to be more widespread than previously assumed.

Alternative Explanations for Alleged Ukraine-Related Purges

As the Russian military has clearly failed to implement its initial plans to achieve a quick victory over Ukraine, it has raised expectations that Putin would punish those who misinformed him or botched the operation on the ground. Three cases have been widely discussed in this respect. First, it was widely reported by Ukrainian and Russian sources that the head of the FSB’s Fifth Service, Sergei Beseda, and his deputy,

Anatolii Boliukh, who had been responsible for intelligence operations in Ukraine in advance of the war, had been arrested for providing poor or even false information to Putin. The second case is the alleged arrest of Roman Gavrillov, the deputy chief of the National Guard, who was among those responsible for special forces operations of the National Guard in Ukraine. The third and most high-profile case is the temporary disappearance of Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, who was not seen in public from 11 to 25 March. While some media reports suggested that Shoigu was suffering from heart problems, his absence triggered speculations that Shoigu might be purged by Putin for misinforming the president, for corruption in the army, and for the botched military campaign in Ukraine as a whole. Others even surmised that Shoigu might have been plotting a coup himself.

While it might well turn out to be true that Putin is seeking to identify the culprits of the failures in Ukraine and is determined to purge officials, it appears that mainstream interpretations of these three cases often fail to account for inconsistencies and to address open questions, being driven instead by wishful thinking. But as long as the fog of war prevails, some caveats should be understood before premature conclusions about far-ranging purges are drawn.

First, due to the personalist nature of the regime, Putin's warped insider perspective differs considerably from that of outsiders in terms of what constitutes failure and what measures need to be taken to prevent such failures going forward.

Second, Putin has historically not fired individuals immediately following a misdemeanor. Instead, some time has usually passed and bureaucratic politics taken place before punitive action has been taken. If Putin changes this pattern of behavior now, during the war in Ukraine, it will be a serious sign of potential upheaval in the regime that goes far beyond the three individual cases discussed above.

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Third, assertions about ongoing purges usually omit the inconsistencies between various reports. With regard to the FSB's Fifth Service, some reports suggest that Beseda's deputy, Anatolii Boliukh, left the FSB a long time ago and can therefore not be "purged" over the ongoing war. Other inconsistencies relate to the state body that performed the alleged arrest of Beseda and Boliukh (the Presidential Protection Service, or the FSB's own security department) and whether an arrest took actually place or whether the FSB officials were merely questioned for unknown reasons.

Fourth, when assessing these alleged "purges," alternative explanations unrelated to Ukraine are usually omitted. In his previous position at the National Guard, Roman Gavrillov was responsible for rooting out corruption and misbehavior; his efforts led to the dismissal of almost a dozen high-ranking officials, meaning that he surely acquired powerful enemies within and beyond the National Guard. Moreover, more recent reporting has suggested that Gavrillov was not arrested, but simply dismissed.

Overall, it should be kept in mind that even if a number of Ukraine-related arrests and dismissals have occurred, this does not automatically amount to wholesale purges that would develop into elite dynamics relevant for overall regime stability. Putin, after all, has sacked hundreds of officials during his career, including close allies, and Shoigu has survived over three decades of elite infighting.

Outlook

In sum, the main question observers should be asking themselves as long as the fog of war persists is: Should we assess elite dynamics in Russia using the same criteria as we did before or is the war having such a fundamental impact on Russia domestically that we need to adapt our assumptions and criteria for assessing Putin's relationship with the elite accordingly?

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ANALYSIS

Protest and Opposition: Short-Term Depression, Long-Term Uncertainty

By Jan Matti Dollbaum (University of Bremen)

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Abstract

Protest and opposition in Russia have had a complex and at times conflictual relationship. But as elections have gradually lost their competitiveness, protest has become increasingly important. This article presents educated guesses about the future of the relationship between protest and opposition in light of Russia's war against Ukraine. In the short term, the regime's clearly signaled readiness to quell any form of resistance suggests that protest is unlikely. In the long term, however, changing socio-economic conditions have the potential to reshuffle the protest landscape and generate incentives among elites to address social grievances, perhaps even giving new life to the loyal opposition. Protest, therefore, might not only re-emerge, but also usher in a new phase of political opposition.

Introduction

Protest and opposition in Russia have had a complex and at times conflictual relationship. In the past, not all protesters saw themselves as opposition. Those who protected parks and squares or addressed social ills often abstained from asking questions on the distribution of power. Even participants in the "For Fair Elections" protests in 2011–13 often saw themselves as outside of politics because, after all, they merely wanted the authorities to respect the rules of the game. For their part, those who consider themselves part of the political opposition only gradually came to embrace protest as a serious tool in the repertoire of political action.

Professionalizing Protest

But as elections gradually lost their competitiveness, protest became increasingly important, with Aleksei Navalny famously professionalizing the strategic use of rallies to gain name recognition, motivate activists, and build his political organization. This process, in turn, put protest in authorities' spotlight: in proportion as it grew in importance for oppositional actors, it came to be treated as a threat in and of itself. Marking the pre-war climax of this spiral of escalation, the year 2021 saw

authorities crack down not only on demonstrators, but also on independent media and all other entities involved in organizing, facilitating or simply covering protest.

We do not know what impact Russia's war against Ukraine will have on the relationship between protest and opposition. But given the developments sketched above, we can make a few educated guesses, which can be roughly divided into short-term and longer-term outcomes.

Short-Term Scenario

In the coming weeks and months, the trend outlined above is likely to accelerate. Putin's recent talk of "cleaning society" of "national traitors" further frees authorities on all administrative levels to use repression against any form of public dissent (be it narrowly political or not), as long as its protagonists are successfully cast as treacherous elements. This will make the use of protest—a form of political engagement that is public by definition—yet more dangerous and therefore less likely. Moreover, the clampdown on all forms of organized non-systemic opposition means that hardly any actors are left to protest strategically. The systemic Communist Party (KPRF), which in the past has used protest to draw attention to its

demands and has sometimes supported aggrieved citizens, has fallen completely in line and is currently too busy demonstrating its loyalty to be a force for protest. For a while, therefore, the regime's treatment of protest and opposition as similarly threatening will suppress both, thereby continuing developments that began years ago.

Long-Term Scenario

In the medium to long term, however, the coming economic crisis may well shake these established patterns. Mounting grievances—resulting from rising food prices, unpaid wages, and unemployment—may push new groups of people onto the streets, people who have never protested before and have thus never experienced repression. Moreover, as stability erodes, and with it an important part of Putin's claims to legitimacy, the war's consequences might turn larger swathes of people against him personally. And although systemic opposition forces themselves will likely not call for protest, strong independent mobilization could make the parties' elites (most notably the KPRF) rethink the bargain with the Kremlin that has secured them a place in the system in exchange for loyalty. Protest, it therefore seems,

could not only re-emerge, but also usher in a new phase of political opposition. This scenario is unlikely but cannot be ruled out. If it becomes reality, the Kremlin will need to decide to what extent it is willing to escalate repression against the unemployed and hungry—people who are quite difficult to paint as “national traitors.”

Conclusion

Given the regime's clearly signaled readiness to quell any form of resistance, the coming weeks and months are unlikely to see much protest. Changing socio-economic conditions, however, have the potential to reshuffle the protest landscape and generate incentives among elites to address social grievances, perhaps even giving new life to the loyal opposition. That said, even if the systemic parties try to exploit potential social protest politically, it is far from guaranteed that this will bring an end to the war. If the regime's response to social mobilization includes costly concessions like higher social payments, however, this might put further strain on the state's finances, which will increase the pressure on the regime more broadly. In this scenario, volatile times lie ahead.

About the Author

Dr *Jan Matti Dollbaum* is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Bremen. His research interests include protest and social movements in democratic and authoritarian regimes. Together with Morvan Lallouet and Ben Noble, he recently published the first book-length study on Aleksei Navalny.

ANALYSIS

Netoscope: A New Black Box Through Which the Russian Government Controls Content Dissemination?

By Liudmila Sivetc (Turku University) and Mariëlle Wijermars (Maastricht University)

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Abstract

Russia has increasingly adopted policies that leverage the power of private infrastructure owners, including algorithmic gatekeepers, to achieve more effective, but less easily perceptible, control over online content dissemination. This article analyzes the Netoscope project, which has compiled a database of Russian domain names suspected of malware, botnet or phishing activities. Within the framework of this project, federal censor Roskomnadzor cooperates with Yandex (which downgrades listed domains in its search results), Kaspersky, and foreign partners. The article concludes that non-transparency creates possibilities for misuse of the project.

History and Functionality of the Netoscope Project

Over the last decade, Russia has increasingly adopted policies to leverage the power of private infrastructure

owners, including algorithmic gatekeepers, to achieve more effective, but less easily perceptible, control over online content dissemination (Sivetc 2020, 2021; Wijermars, 2021). One example of this kind of coopera-

tion is the Netoscope Project, launched in 2012 by the Coordination Center for top-level domains .ru and .рф.¹ As stated on the official website of the project, www.netoscope.ru, the project “aims at making the Russian domain space safer for users.” A representative of the Coordination Center who is directly involved in the functioning of Netoscope explains that the project was not intended to regulate the Russian internet. Rather, the project was necessary to improve the reputation of the Russian top-level domains, which fell outside the ranks of the safest domains in 2009–2011. In light of this, the Coordination Center proposed the Netoscope Project as a platform for cooperation with experts from the cybersecurity field.

Cybersecurity experts, in turn, needed to cooperate with the Coordination Center because only this organization is able to terminate the delegation of domain names to resources involved in the “epidemic” dissemination of, for example, malware. Domain name delegation means connecting a registered domain name with the corresponding address of the server hosting the relevant website. The termination of domain delegation does not cancel the registration of this domain name. Rather, it terminates the connectivity between the domain name and the corresponding address, making the relevant website inaccessible until the delegation is restored. Cybersecurity experts can detect malware being spread by such resources and can identify which domain names serve as coordinating command points. However, experts cannot disable the resources behind malware attacks because the termination of the delegation of the involved domain names is not in their power. Netoscope has provided the necessary mechanisms for doing so. Now, expert partners send information on malicious domain names to the project to enable the Coordination Center to expeditiously react to cyber threats. The aforementioned representative of the Coordination Center indicates that cooperation within the framework of the Netoscope project has led to a decline in the number of malicious activities in the .ru domain, thereby improving its reputation. If in the beginning Netoscope flagged 100,000 malicious domains per year, the representative indicated that by 2020 the figures had decreased significantly and the domain had become “cleaner.”

In February 2021, the project’s website listed 17 Netoscope partners: Roskomnadzor (a government agency responsible for controlling the Russian Internet), Group IB, Kaspersky, Mail.Ru, Rostelecom, TCI (Technical Center “Internet”), Yandex, BI.ZONE (a

daughter company of Sberbank), RU-CERT, IThreat, the Association of MasterCard Participants, SkyDNS, SURF, FIFA, National Computer Incident Response and Coordination Center, and Dr. Web. The list of partners thus includes the two key players on the Russian Internet: Yandex, the Russian counterpart and competitor of Google, is the leading Internet browser, search engine, and news aggregator, while Mail.ru Group is the owner of Russia’s most popular social networks (among many other activities).

Roskomnadzor, according to the Coordination Center’s 2016 Report (2017, p. 12), joined Netoscope on 19 April 2016. The federal agency and Netoscope agreed on cooperation aimed, *inter alia*, at “the joint investigation of content, types, and features of unlawful online information and the development of means of precluding it from dissemination on the Internet.” Despite only becoming an official partner in 2016, Roskomnadzor, as the representative of the Coordination Center clarifies, has been involved in Netoscope since the outset. The agency was an active participant before 2016 and has continued to cooperate actively since signing the agreement.

Experts contribute to Netoscope by sending information on domain names involved in phishing, malware, and botnet activities to a database that accumulates the information and stores all suspected domain names. This means that once a domain name is included in the Netoscope database, it will never again be excluded from it. In other words, the flagged domain name will not be excluded even when it no longer hosts the malicious content. Even if the domain name ceases to exist—namely, if its registration in one of the Russian top-level domains is discontinued—this fact does not affect the information stored in the database. The principle of forever storage, as the representative of the Coordination Center explains, is based on the presumption that a domain name that has been used for malicious activities in the past preserves its dangerous potential and is likely to be used again. The Netoscope database serves as the basis for the “Domain Checker” available on the Netoscope website. Any Internet user can use it to find out whether a domain name registered to the .ru, .su, and .рф domains has been flagged by Netoscope.

According to the project’s website, the Netoscope database contains approximately 4.7 million domain names (December 2020). As the representative of the Coordination Center explains, this figure should not be understood as an indicator of a high level of malicious activities: only a small number of these domain

1 This article draws on an article by L. Sivets and M. Wijermars, “The Vulnerabilities of Trusted Notifier-Models in Russia: The Case of Netoscope,” *Media & Communication* 9, no. 4 (2021): Media Control Revisited: Challenges, Bottom-Up Resistance and Agency in the Digital Age, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4237>.

names (around 5,000) are currently flagged as malicious. Instead, a site's appearance in the database should signal to users that the relevant website is safe to access—even if the fact that it was previously flagged by Netoscope raises questions regarding the website's safety. For example, according to the representative of the Coordination Center, companies that are involved in the domain name business decide not to buy a certain domain name if it has been flagged by Netoscope as being involved in malicious activities in the past. They refer to this practice as an “indirect effect” of the Netoscope project.

Netoscope has yet another effect, but this one is direct and planned: according to the Coordination Center's 2014 report (2015, p. 11), Yandex has been using the Netoscope database since 2014 to exclude optimization links to websites corresponding to flagged domain names from its search results (see also Kudriavtseva, 2020). The representative of the Coordination Center confirms that Yandex can use the Netoscope database to adjust how its algorithms decide which websites are to be prioritized in search results lists. At the same time, Yandex also contributes to the database. The representative cites the Yandex Safe Browsing database as a source that Netoscope has been using to enrich and refine its data about domain names included in the Netoscope database. However, they point out that the Netoscope database is just one of many resources that Yandex uses as an input source for its algorithms.

Embedded Vulnerability

The representative of the Coordination Center highlights a unique feature of Netoscope: the project provides a platform for collaboration among competitors. As partners in Netoscope, they are willing to share information with the Coordination Center and contribute to the Netoscope database

Andrei Yarnykh from Kaspersky mentions market competition among Netoscope partners as the reason why there is only unilateral communication between Netoscope and the company. Information submitted to Netoscope by partners is available only to the project, not to its partners.

As the representative explains, cooperation around the Netoscope database occurs as follows. The Netoscope database is located at the Coordination Center. Each partner sends information on those domain names that it identifies as being involved in malicious activities

to the Netoscope database. The representative stresses that the partner decides whether to flag a domain name in accordance with its expertise. According to Andrei Yarnykh, Netoscope aggregates information sent by the partners and issues reports on the level of malicious activities like malware, spam, and phishing. These reports are purposely designed not to reveal the size and content of each partner's contribution to the project. As Andrei Yarnykh says, reports provide “statistics rather than analytics.” Netoscope does not enable Kaspersky to see which partner flagged a certain domain name.

Importantly, according to the representative of the Coordination Center, Netoscope relies on the partners' expertise and does not verify inputs into the database. They explain that such verification is outside the scope of the Coordination Center's tasks. The Coordination Center does not employ experts to check whether, for instance, a domain name flagged by a Netoscope partner as being involved in phishing is indeed connected to such activities. If a Netoscope partner “says that this domain name is connected with phishing at this moment, it means that the partner answers for [the accuracy of] its words.”

The Domain Checker available on the Netoscope website warns users about any malicious activity the checked domain name is/was involved in based on Netoscope partners' assessments. In line with the restricted disclosure and anonymized aggregation discussed above, the results received from the Domain Checker do not show which partner flagged the domain name in question nor when this occurred. As the representative of the Coordination Center explains, making information non-traceable was “the main condition at the start of the project.” This means that although the Coordination Center has access to these details, information about partners' involvement is not disclosed.

The lack of transparency extends to all partners in the project. As Andrei Yarnykh explains, Kaspersky sends information “like an email” and is not able to trace how it is subsequently processed by Netoscope. This means that Roskomnadzor can also send unchecked “emails” to the Netoscope database, which can trigger re-indexing of the allegedly malicious domain names and positioning them further down Yandex's list of search results. Thus, the functioning of Netoscope resembles a black box that filters out allegedly harmful domain names without accountability or safeguards against abuse.

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ANALYSIS

Russian Academia and the Ukraine War

By Dmitry Dubrovskiy (Center for Independent Social Research / Central and East European Law Initiative)

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Abstract

Before Russia launched its war on Ukraine, the Kremlin sought to demonstrate the strength of Russian universities and researchers in international rankings. Now, Western anti-war sanctions are working to isolate Russian scientists. In response, those parts of the Russian academy that historically opposed collaboration with the West are seeking to impose nationally defined metrics. Russia is likely to pursue a new form of academic internationalization, turning its attention to China, India, and Iran rather than the West.

Situation Before the War

Russian officials frequently emphasize the importance of developing Russia's higher education potential and seek to position the country at the forefront of technical innovation. President Putin himself constantly states that “Russia should expect to play a leading role in science and technology.”

The Kremlin identified science as one of its top priorities by making it one of the national projects focused on achieving the strategic goals Russia set for itself during the period 2018–2024. The Russian government wants the country to be among the top five countries engaged in research and development in the specific areas that it identified. For this purpose, it established science mega-projects as a way to promote the active development of science under conditions of limited resources. Among the six such projects developed, the primary emphasis was on nuclear and laser physics. These projects were designed in collaboration with the European Union's Horizon 2020 program. In addition, Russia invested about 1.5 billion euros in 2017–2020 in nuclear physics projects abroad. In total, there were 115 scientific projects with international participation

by 2020; the European Union was Russia's main partner on these projects, with 22 projects, while the CIS countries ranked second, with 17 projects.

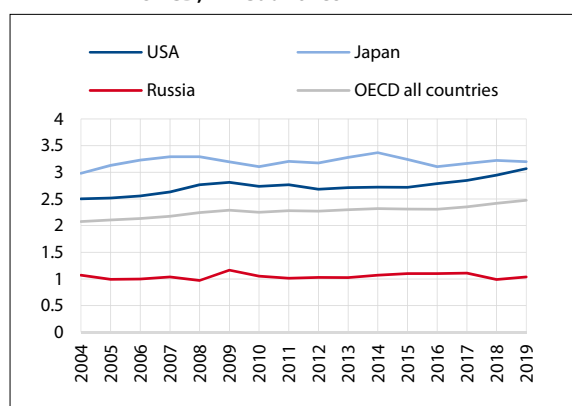
In the field of higher education, the main task was improving the position of Russian universities in international rankings. Thus, the program 5-100-2020 sought to get five Russian universities into the top 100 universities worldwide. The universities involved in the program received significant government funding. Although the program did not achieve its main goal, it brought about several notable accomplishments: the emergence of the very category of a research university in Russia; an improvement in the rankings of universities previously unrepresented in the international arena; a noticeable increase in the numbers of international publications; new laboratories and access to new research equipment; increased student and academic exchanges; and intensified participation of Russian scholars in international research projects and conferences.

After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, the ambitious goal of turning Russian science and education into a flagship of modernization encountered serious limitations, both political and structural. Figure 1 shows that

the financing of science and higher education in Russia seriously lags behind the global leaders: whereas Russia spent about 1.05% of GDP on R&D in 2019, USA and Japan spent three times more—3.067 and 3.199, respectively—and the OECD average was more than twice as high as Russia's spending.

In terms of the number of publications and the citation rate, Russian scientists rank 12th–13th worldwide (according to Clarivate Analytics statistics), a position far inferior to both the United States and China. As for international exchanges, their volume remains quite modest: for example, there were only slightly more than 800 foreign researchers in Russia in 2019 (by comparison, there were 13,000 in the United States). After 2014, the structure of student exchanges changed dramatically. Although exchanges with Europe and the United States persisted, students from China, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan became the main participants.

Figure 1: Gross Domestic Spending on R&D, % of GDP 2004–2019, Annual Three Highlighted Countries (USA, Russia, Japan) and OECD, All Countries



Source: OECD, 2022; see also Table 1 on p. 21

At the same time, there is serious opposition to international cooperation with the West, primarily from the ministries responsible for foreign policy and security, as well as from an influential group of scientists and teachers who for various reasons do not benefit from policies internationalizing science and education, as Ivan Kurilla noted in a 2016 RAD article.

Nevertheless, not even the serious isolationist steps that began with the 2014 annexation of Crimea led to such dramatic developments as followed the beginning of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

International Cooperation in Science and Education

Russia's war on Ukraine has had dramatic consequences for Russia's international cooperation. The implementa-

tion of mega-science projects is being jeopardized, as is Russia's participation in international projects in Europe and the United States more broadly. The largest of these projects, CERN in Geneva, has already frozen collaboration with Russia. MIT ended cooperation with Skolkovo, while its head, Arkady Dvorkovich, who as FIDE chairman condemned the war, resigned.

All projects supported by the European Union have also been put on hold. Many, though by no means all, foreign instructors and scientists are leaving Russian projects and exiting the country. European and individual national university associations are suspending cooperation: the European University Association expelled 12 Russian universities, while Germany, Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, and many other EU countries have officially frozen all scientific and educational contacts. The open letter of rectors of Russian universities, in which about half of the current rectors of Russian universities openly expressed support for the war in Ukraine, added fuel to the fire. This declaration became an important argument for those who claim that all employees, professors, and researchers of Russian state institutions are responsible for the actions of the Russian army that is carrying out aggression against Ukraine.

Concurrently, all academic exchanges were cancelled, and many undergraduate and graduate students from Russia and Belarus who had applied for various internships and projects were rejected. Many scientific associations decided that official collaboration with Russian institutions, particularly at conferences or other scientific events, was no longer feasible. Some researchers abroad, primarily from Ukraine, began to demand a general ban on publications by Russian authors as part of a general boycott of Russian science and higher education. Some publishing companies adopted a similar stance, including Clarivate, which closed its office in Russia. However, another major publishing company, Elsevier, has stated that it will not allow a boycott of Russian researchers. Finally, international conferences that had been slated to be held in Russia have been cancelled or moved to other countries. For example, the International Mathematical Congress, which had been scheduled for St. Petersburg, will be held entirely online.

At the same time, because of difficulties obtaining visas and paying conference participation fees, Russian scientists are now unable to attend conferences in person. This inability to travel poses a serious threat to the Russian community of scientific isolation from European and American science.

Statements by some Western organizations seek to separate official Russian institutions, which for the most part have supported the war, from individual scientists, researchers, and students. For example, the president

of Harvard said that maintaining scholarly contacts becomes even more important in times of global crisis. At the same time, other countries and institutions have interpreted their governments' decisions to stop cooperation to mean that they should prohibit either institutional cooperation or all cooperation with Russian researchers, professors or students.

However, it is currently unclear what the general policy toward Russian and Belarusian researchers working abroad, as well as toward students from these countries, will be. For example, the University of Tartu has announced that in 2022 it will not accept students from Russia and Belarus.

The aforementioned facts paint a picture of the dramatic and increasingly unprecedented isolation of Russian science and higher education, which is perhaps surpassing the scale of the Cold War and becoming more comparable to what happened to the USSR during the late Stalin era. Russia's growing repression of students, professors, and researchers who protest the war reinforces this effect.

Effect of Sanctions—Consequences and Prognosis

The first consequence of the anti-war sanctions in the field of science and higher education was an official proposal to stop considering international English-language publications when assessing instructors and researchers and to reorient the metrics to the Russian-language part of the Russian Science Citation Index (RSCI). This index will no longer take into consideration foreign publications; it will exist solely as a reflection of the publication activity of Russian authors in Russia. Such an approach will naturally lead to a decrease in the internationally measured publication activity of Russian scientists and researchers and has the approval of those in the Russian academy who have long been annoyed by what they see as their colleagues "complaining to the West."

It is obvious, however, that the prohibition on international cooperation will also bring about an overall decrease in publications. Measures blocking the export of the latest equipment and materials for natural science research (approximately 80 percent of which were supplied to Russia from abroad) mean that such equipment will simply become unavailable. This blockade will affect the conduct of experiments, leading to a drop in the number of publications.

One can nevertheless imagine that the liberal part of the community, especially those in the social sciences and humanities, will—even in exile—continue to publish in international journals if they still can do so. On the other hand, members of the natural sciences seem inclined to value their jobs more, since it is much harder and more expensive to secure a new job for a physicist or chemist than for a humanist. That being said,

there is an open question as to whether international journals will agree to publish articles by Russian colleagues in cases where the research was funded from the Russian budget.

Keeping in mind the bureaucratic logic, it is possible to predict that "internationalization" will remain an aim of science and higher education in Russia, but this internationalization will emphasize a new international community, based on the recently proclaimed turn to the East.

A possible way out for Russian science would be cooperation with Chinese universities and the intensification of both scientific and academic exchanges with China, India, and Iran—countries that have notable scientific potential, are not involved in the current sanctions on Russian education and science, and may be interested in deepening cooperation with Russia in the framework of international projects. In fact, one can imagine that such cooperation would make it possible to circumvent sanctions. Russia did something similar for Crimean universities, which have been under sanctions since 2014, and the so-called "national universities" of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR). Since direct student and academic exchanges were impossible, groups of students from these Russian-occupied Ukrainian universities were paired with groups of students from Russian universities, such as Moscow State University. Nevertheless, such cooperation is unlikely to be a full-fledged substitute for cooperation with the scientifically and technologically advanced countries in Europe and North America.

Given the modest political support for military adventurism in Ukraine, as well as the deeply pessimistic forecasts for the Russian economy over the next decade, the following can be confidently predicted. Dependence on science and education in China will grow, since it will be the only major donor to the development of Russian science for the foreseeable future. It will be quite possible to intensify scientific cooperation with China, India, and Iran in the fields of natural sciences and technology. Considering the proposal to allow IT specialists to leave Russia only with FSB permission, the same agency will likely control the exit of specialists in the field of strategically important research on the pretext of protecting state secrets, in a clear echo of Soviet practice.

At the same time, there is growing anti-Western rhetoric in humanitarian and social sciences, which impacts representatives of the liberal part of the Russian academy first. Independent historians have already come under attack, among them those who worked for "Memorial," an organization devoted to documenting Stalinist crimes that was recently shut down on government orders. Several *artes liberales* educational programs—at St. Petersburg State University and at the Moscow

School of Social and Economic Sciences (MSEES—Shaninka)—have been threatened with closure and their professors with criminal prosecution. In general, professors who protest the war are fired, while students who speak out against the invasion are expelled. In this regard, European and American universities' support not only for the Ukrainian academy, whose members are fleeing the war, but also for those members of the

Russian academy who are fleeing repression for openly opposing the war becomes very important.

As Russian scientists and scientific journalists state in a petition against the war published in the newspaper *Troitskii Variant* (TrV-Science) that collected more than 8,000 signatures, “Russia’s isolation from the world means further cultural and technological degradation of our country in the complete absence of positive prospects.”

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Table 1: Gross Domestic Spending on R&D, % of GDP 2004–2019, Annual Three Highlighted Countries (USA, Russia, Japan) and OECD, All Countries

Year	USA	Japan	Russia	OECD all countries
2004	2.502	2.981	1.072	2.076
2005	2.517	3.131	0.994	2.105
2006	2.558	3.228	0.999	2.132
2007	2.632	3.293	1.039	2.176
2008	2.768	3.292	0.972	2.244
2009	2.813	3.196	1.166	2.288
2010	2.735	3.105	1.052	2.250
2011	2.765	3.205	1.015	2.280
2012	2.682	3.174	1.028	2.273
2013	2.712	3.279	1.027	2.299
2014	2.721	3.368	1.072	2.320
2015	2.719	3.241	1.101	2.310
2016	2.788	3.107	1.102	2.309
2017	2.847	3.166	1.110	2.352
2018	2.947	3.222	0.990	2.419
2019	3.067	3.199	1.039	2.476

Source: OECD, 2022

Sanctions Likely to Derail the Trajectory of Russia's Agricultural Sector

By Stephen K. Wegren (Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX USA)

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of sanctions on Russia's agricultural sector in terms of access to inputs, financing, and export markets. These three factors have been instrumental to Russia's rise as an agrarian power, so their limitation augurs change in Russia's global status.

Strong Performance since 2014

Prior to Russia's unprovoked 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia's agricultural sector had been one of the country's few clear economic "winners" since 2014. In six of the eight calendar years starting in 2014, the growth rate for gross product in the agricultural sector exceeded growth in national GDP (based on ruble value). Average annual grain harvests increased from 87 million metric tons in 2008–2013 to 119 million metric tons in 2014–2021. In addition, since 2014 Russia has ranked first or second in the world by volume of wheat exports every agricultural year (Russia's agricultural year runs from July 1 of one year to June 30 of the next year). The dollar value of Russia's agri-food exports rose from \$19.8 billion in 2014 to \$37.7 billion in 2021.¹ Russia's grain trade accounted for nearly 25 percent of global grain trade by volume during the 2020/21 agricultural year.² Analysts within Russia spoke of the nation as an emerging food superpower.

The war with Ukraine and subsequent Western sanctions will interrupt the upward trajectory of Russian agriculture and its export sector. In particular, three key economic factors underpinned the growth of Russia's food production and exports. This article therefore surveys how sanctions will affect access to inputs, financing, and export markets.

Access to Inputs

Agricultural exports depend on the existence of surplus food. Surplus food—the remainder after domestic needs are met—has been generated due to an increase in yields (crops) and productivity (animals). Crop yields have increased due to a rise in the application of mineral fertilizers and the re-mechanization of agriculture.³ The problem for Russia is that it imports a considerable percentage of its agricultural equipment. In 2018, for instance, Russia imported 40% of its agricultural

machinery, although there was considerable regional variation.⁴ In that same year, the annual import market for agricultural equipment in Russia was estimated at \$741 million for tractors, \$505 million for harvesting equipment, and \$427 million for assorted other equipment such as seeders, ploughs, and greenhouse equipment.⁵ The market for agricultural equipment was expected to stay strong until at least 2025 due to government efforts to ensure food security and food self-sufficiency, as well as the need to rebuild the stock of equipment, which had declined precipitously since 2010. To cite just a few examples, the stock of ploughs had declined by 57%, seeders by 52%, tractors by 51%, and grain harvesters by 50% between 2008 and 2018. To rebuild equipment stocks, Russian farms' demand for foreign equipment had been growing, aided by a state program that leased farm equipment at subsidized prices.

Prior to the war, the United States was selling more than \$80 million in agricultural machinery to Russia annually. Following the invasion, the American company John Deere, the largest producer of agricultural machinery in the world, pulled out of the Russian market, which means that previously purchased machinery will not be serviced and spare parts will not be available to Russian farmers. Among European nations, meanwhile, Germany used to lead the way, selling more than \$400 million in agricultural equipment to Russia, followed by the Netherlands, at more than \$225 million annually. The precipitous decline in the value of the ruble against the U.S. dollar and the Euro since the outbreak of war will make the purchase of Western agricultural machinery from third-party sellers prohibitively expensive, likely delaying re-mechanization.

Another input that is vulnerable to the consequences of the Ukrainian war is imported seed. While analysts often cite Russia's impressive increases in crop and grain production over the past 20 years, frequently overlooked

1 <https://www.agroinvestor.ru/analytics/news/37566-eksport-produktsii-apk-v-proshlom-godu-dostig-37-7-mlrd/>

2 Global grain trade was 198.7 million tons of grain in 2021, of which Russia's share was 49.2 million tons.

3 <https://kvedomosti.ru/news/https-mcx-gov-ru-press-service-news-s-nachala-goda-agrarii-narastili-tempy-obnovleniya-parka-selkhoztekhniki-na-15-6.html>

4 <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/russia-agribusiness>

5 <https://yugagro.org/Articles/examining-russias-agricultural-machinery-impo>

is the fact that Russia imports high percentages of the seeds used to grow various crops. Although Russia has devoted significant resources and effort to developing its own seed industry, the country remains dependent on foreign seeds. In 2020, for example, Russia imported 58% of its corn seeds, 73% of its sunflower seeds, and 98% of its sugar beet seeds.⁶ Russia's 2020 Food Security Doctrine states that the country should produce a minimum of 75% of its own seeds. For the 2022 spring sowing, most regions were already supplied with sufficient seed, but if sanctions extend into next year, the following winter and spring planting seasons could be affected.

The dependence on foreign seed is important because the decline in the value of the ruble makes the purchase of imported seeds—just like other inputs—more expensive. Total expenditures on the 2022 planting are estimated at a record high R1 trillion, 20% more than in 2021, owing to rising prices for seed, fuel, and other inputs.⁷ Further, there is no guarantee that Western nations will not cut off access to seeds should sanctions be expanded in the future, although in March 2022 G7 nations indicated that sanctions should not include food trade.⁸

Access to Financing

Grain producers depend on access to subsidies to fund purchases of fuel, fertilizer, seeds, and pesticides during their sowing seasons. For several years, the primary form of state support for agriculture has been subsidized credits and loans. The spring 2022 sowing season witnessed two main problems. First, because of the increase in the price of seeds, fertilizer, fuel, and other inputs, a change in the subsidy process was enacted by the Ministry of Agriculture whereby subsidies were to be allocated prior to planting rather than afterwards, as had been the custom. However, as of mid-March 2022 only five regions had changed their legislation to allow subsidies to be allocated as a monetary advance. As a result, less than 3% of the R127 billion allocated by the federal government to support spring sowing had actually been distributed by regional governments, a fact that was greatly impacting the progress of the spring sowing in certain areas.⁹

The difficulty in obtaining subsidy advances affected agrohholdings, which are the largest, most modernized,

and most productive farms in Russia. They are located mostly in the south, which generates the most agricultural production. Agrohholdings reported difficulties obtaining foreign pesticides for their crops due to rising prices (a reality that dated back to fall 2021) and a lack of deliveries from foreign suppliers in March 2022.¹⁰ The shortage of pesticides is important because their application has a direct impact on yields and total output. This is especially true in southern Russia, where air temperatures are higher and are rising due to climate change, since warmer temperatures increase the presence of insects, locusts, and other pests.

The second problem with financing is that after Russia's Central Bank raised its interest rate to 20% in late February, all loans became more expensive. Although interest rates on agricultural loans are subsidized, the increase in the Central Bank rate means that the cost of borrowing rose as much as 17%.¹¹ The increase in the cost of borrowing, combined with more expensive inputs across the board, puts financial pressure on farms.

Access to Markets

With food security for several basic commodities ensured, starting in 2018 the Russian government emphasized an increase in food exports. Various efforts toward that goal paid off as the dollar value of food exports reached a record almost \$38 billion in 2021; in that same year, Russia sold food to 160 countries worldwide.¹² In addition, in 2021 Russia continued to expand the number of its agricultural attaché offices in different countries from 23 to 31.¹³

Restrictions on export trade can be traced to early 2020, when global food prices began to rise, prompting Russia to renew its emphasis on domestic food security. In April 2020 Russia placed an export quota on various grains that ran to the end of the agricultural year (June 30). In 2021, Russia again imposed an export quota on grains for the second half of the agricultural year and also introduced a floating export tariff on wheat in June 2021 that has remained in effect since then. The export tariff is equal to 70% of the difference between \$200 per ton and the contract price. The floating tariff means that it adjusts in line with changes in contract prices, which are influenced by world market prices. As global wheat prices rose in the second half of 2021, Russia's

6 <https://agrovesti.net/news/indst/v-rossii-predlagayut-ogranichit-import-semyan.html>

7 <https://www.agroinvestor.ru/analytics/news/37721-zatraty-na-posevnyu-v-etom-godu-dostignut-rekorda/>

8 <https://dairynews.today/news/strany-g7-sanktsii-protiv-rf-ne-dolzheny-prepyatstv.html>

9 <https://www.agroinvestor.ru/analytics/news/37704-agrarii-stolknulis-so-slozhnostyami-pri-poluchenii-avansovykh-subsidiy/>

10 <https://www.agroinvestor.ru/markets/news/37670-agrokholdingi-soobshchili-o-slozhnostyakh-s-zakupkami-sredstv-zashchity-rasteniy/>

11 <https://agrovesti.net/news/indst/agrokholdingi-stolknulis-s-problemami-po-zajmam-s-playayushchej-stavkoj.html>

12 <https://agrovesti.net/news/indst/rossiya-v-etom-godu-eksportirovala-produktsiyu-apk-v-bolee-chem-160-stran-mira.html>

13 <https://mcx.gov.ru/press-service/news/minselkhoz-rossii-rasshiryaet-set-attashe-po-apk-za-rubezhom/>

export tariff also increased, eventually costing exporters R92 billion.¹⁴ The export tariff put downward pressure on exports: during the first half of the 2021–22 agricultural year—the part of the season when exports are highest—the volume of grain exports fell by more than 24% compared to the same period in the 2020/21 season.¹⁵

On February 15, 2022, a previously planned export quota went into effect that limited sales to states outside the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to 11 million tons of Russian grain (including 8 million tons of wheat). The quota will run until June 30, 2022. But after the war broke out, the Russian government on March 10, 2022, introduced a temporary ban on the export of grains—wheat, rye, barley, and corn—to countries in the Eurasian Economic Union. This will remain in effect until June 30, 2022.¹⁶ Contracts signed before the ban were allowed to be fulfilled.¹⁷ This restriction was adopted “to protect the domestic food market” and to prevent the resale of Russian grain by EAEU nations to third-party nations.¹⁸ An additional ban on the export of white and raw sugar to countries outside the EAEU will be in effect until August 31, 2022.¹⁹ Although nations in the EAEU are not among the largest purchasers of Russian wheat, the ban on wheat exports will affect Russia’s overall export levels.

Beyond administrative restrictions on grain exports, sanctions are an important restraint on Russia’s grain trade because Western purchasers do not want to do business with Russian grain companies. Accordingly, the forecast for Russia’s grain exports during the 2021/22 agricultural year (July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022) was lowered to 28 million tons of grain and 23 million tons of wheat, a more than 30% decrease from 2021.²⁰ For comparison, during the 2020/21 agricultural year, Russia exported 49 million tons of grain, including more than 38 million tons of wheat.

About the Author

Stephen K. Wegren is Distinguished University Professor and Professor of Political Science at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, USA. His most recent books are *The Food Revolution in Russia: The Transformation of the Food System* (Routledge, 2021); and *Russia’s Role in the Contemporary International Agri-Food Trade System* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

The countries with the most to lose from any reduction in Russian grain exports are those in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Egypt is the world’s largest importer of wheat, more than 80% of which it buys from Russia and Ukraine. Turkey also buys large amounts of Russian cereals. These and other authoritarian countries throughout the region depend on Russian grain not only to maintain food supplies, but also to subsidize bread and other grain products. As global grain prices rise, it puts financial pressure on those governments to maintain subsidy levels. The last time the region experienced the combination of a spike in global grain prices and tight supplies, the popular uprisings known as the Arab Spring occurred, bringing about regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and setting off a civil war in Syria that continues to this day. The curtailment of Russian wheat trade will also affect Afghanistan, Yemen, and Ethiopia, which are experiencing high degrees of food insecurity and even localized famine.

Conclusion

Since 2014, Russia has become a central player in the international food market, ranking first or second in wheat exports every year. Russia’s war with Ukraine and Western sanctions jeopardize the government’s goals for the agricultural sector, as expressed in the current State Program for 2019–2025. Specifically, the goal of raising grain output to 140 million tons annually by 2025 will confront difficulties when it comes to importing high-yield seed, spare parts for machinery, and pesticides. Western sanctions on the Russian economy and the freezing of its overseas assets will also make previous levels of subsidization of agriculture difficult. The goal of increasing food exports to 150% of the 2020 level by 2024 will surely not be attained, as domestic food security takes priority.

14 <https://agrovesti.net/news/indst/byudzhet-rf-poluchil-v-2021-godu-pochti-92-mlrd-rub-ot-eksportnykh-poshlin-na-zerno.html>

15 <https://agrovesti.net/news/indst/eksport-zerna-iz-rossii-s-nachala-2021-2022-selkhozgoda-snizilsya-na-24-4.html>

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