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Against the Grain: Research on Russian Domestic Politics after February 2022

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Abstract. The Russian military assault on Ukraine in February 2022 fueled numerous discussions about the current state and future of Russian studies in general and research on Russian domestic politics in particular. Challenges from various corners, ranging from questioned validity of some sources (such as official statistics and survey research) to problems of data gathering and displacement of Russian scholars, to say nothing of the policy relevance of research on contemporary Russia, coincided with emotive debates among politicians, experts, pundits, and activists. This article focuses on scholarly responses to these challenges and addresses a number of related issues, such as the relevance of theoretical frameworks and the search for methodological solutions and new approaches to data collection and analysis amid the protracted ongoing war. Some suggestions and recommendations for further research on Russian domestic politics are discussed in the conclusion.

The Russian military assault on Ukraine in February 2022 caused many enormously negative consequences for both domestic and international developments in Russia, Ukraine, and Europe, ranging from extraordinary human losses and war-driven mass migration to dramatic changes in various aspects of security and the major rise of the military-industrial complex. Among many other issues, this assault greatly affected global academia in many ways, putting both Russia and Ukraine in the spotlight and generating many discussions among scholars, experts and policy-makers, to say nothing of politicians, pundits, and activists. At the same time, the very environment of research on Russia underwent major restructuring after February 2022, although some tendencies had emerged even before this turning point. The impact of the assault was similar to what I labeled an "exogenous shock" in one of my previous publications (Gel'man, 2023). While some elements of this restructuring were directly caused by war-related political changes, others reflected broader trends in

academia, which severely affected Russian studies and accelerated amid the ongoing war. Some contentious issues in Russian studies were already being discussed among scholars during the period after February 2022 (Bogdanova et al., 2023; Conversations with the Field, 2023; How to Study Russia, 2023), although the context, content and style of these discussions varied greatly in different academic communities.[1] This article is focused on further developments in the field from the perspective of analysis of scholarly responses to recent political, institutional, and scholarly challenges to Russian studies, which have come from various corners. These challenges include questions about the validity not only of certain information sources (such as official economic statistics and survey research), but also of theoretical frameworks, which eventually become outdated and/or require many serious revisions and modifications. Post-2022 Russian studies have faced a major decline in Russian academia (related to institutional crisis, breaking ties between Western and Russian scholarship, and displacement of Russian scholars), increasing problems of data gathering and analysis under conditions of war, the increasing disjuncture between supply and demand in policy-related research on contemporary Russia, and numerous other issues. The problem is not only how scholars should respond to these and other challenges, but also to what extent such responses may help to answer many important research questions regarding Russian politics in the future. This article aims to shed new light on these and related questions.

Two important disclaimers are necessary. First, in this article I deal exclusively with research on Russian politics and do not address research on politics in other states of post-Soviet Eurasia and Eastern Europe.[2] In fact, the consequences of the ongoing war include not only political but also geographical fragmentation of the region, and the very label "post-Soviet" has become less and less useful as an umbrella term for the various former Soviet republics. Indeed, paths of scholarly research on, say, Russian, Armenian and Kazakhstani (not to mention Ukrainian) politics have now greatly diverged theoretically, empirically, and methodologically. Second, in this article I mostly concentrate on research on Russian domestic politics, which is my primary field of interest, and do not devote much attention to research on dynamics of Russian foreign policy, which would require a separate analysis (for an overview, see Polianskii, 2024).[3]

[1] On French and Finnish discussions, respectively, see chapters by Francoise Dauce and Katalin Miklossy in this volume.

[2] On Polish and Hungarian studies, see the chapter by Katalin Miklossy in this volume.

[3] See also chapters by Ivan Gomza and Ivan U. Kłyszcz in this volume.

The structure of this article is the following. After a brief historical excursion into the past and present of Russian studies, I will concentrate on analysis of recent discussions about the domestic sources of the Russian military assault on Ukraine and its causes and effects, as well as on the scholarly search for the roots and remedies of the ongoing war. Then, I will briefly cover some new methodological and empirical developments in research on Russian domestic politics and discuss the need for new frameworks for analysis of Russian politics in a broader theoretical and comparative perspective.[4] Some suggestions and recommendations for further research on Russian domestic politics will be outlined in the conclusion of the article.

Then and Now: The Changing Trajectory of Russian Studies

Historically, Russian studies emerged as a separate interdisciplinary scholarly field in the United States, and later on in Western Europe, during the period of the Cold War due to the policy-driven demand of "know your enemy" (Engerman, 2009). Over time, this field established itself under the rubric of Sovietology. Western researchers produced quite a number of very important scholarly pieces despite limited access to data and relative isolation from mainstream political science as well as huge concentration on security-related issues (Breslauer, 1992). However, Sovietologists not only failed to expect and explain major changes in the Soviet Union during Gorbachev's perestroika but were also not ready to understand the logic behind the Soviet collapse and many other associated processes. It is no wonder that in the 1990s Sovietology was heavily discredited and soon disappeared (Rutland, 1993). The new field of post-Soviet Russian studies emerged amidst several contradictory trends. On the one hand, as Russia was no longer considered an "enemy" in the West, policy-driven interest in the field declined, and several research centers and major projects shrunk if not ceased to exist. In addition, the global refocusing of political science research from area studies to large-N comparative analyses in the 1990s (Bates, 1997) left little room for Russian studies against the background of increasing interest in other regions, ranging from China to the Middle East. On the other hand, the new generation of scholars which now dominates the field of research on post-Soviet Russian politics, and which was trained in comparative political studies (rather than in area studies), was able to effectively use advanced research methods and techniques of data analysis. They successfully seized the emerging opportunities of political openness and data availability in Russia for new scholarly projects, which have resulted in many notable publications (La Lova, 2023). Russia-

[4] On these issues, see also the chapter by Dinissa Duvanova in this volume.

based scholars as well as certain Russia-born representatives of a new global academic diaspora also successfully contributed to the field, and, despite numerous problems (Gel'man, 2015a), there was a clearly visible rise in political research in Russian academia in the 2000s and 2010s. These promising changes gave birth to numerous collaborative projects. Among them, one should mention the Laboratory of Comparative Social Research,[5] a part of the global World Values Survey network (previously led by Ronald Inglehart), based in the Higher School of Economics (HSE), and the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development (initially, a joint venture between the HSE and the Harriman Institute at Columbia University).[6] Both projects became highly visible and productive scholarly enterprises. This is why Timothy Frye's (2017) bold statement that Russian studies were thriving rather than dying, and that the scholarly outputs of this field demonstrated great academic success vis-à-vis other area studies, was not an exaggeration.

The Russian military assault on Ukraine in February 2022 seriously undermined if not completely overturned these tendencies. First, it ended the age of political openness and data availability in Russia and put many research projects on Russian politics into question. For example, the Survey of Russian Elites, the major longitudinal study of attitudes of Russian foreign policy elites conducted by American scholars in collaboration with Russian pollsters from 1993 to 2020 (Rivera, 2020), was forced to stop as there was no longer any way to interview elite representatives in Russia, who became unavailable for conversations during the war. Second, Russian scholarship in social sciences in general and in political science in particular faced major institutional and personnel losses during the war – some research centers were either closed[7] or changed their profiles, and many leading scholars left Russia for indefinitely long (Al'bitskii, 2024). Still, some talented Russia-based scholars continued to produce first-class research on Russian domestic politics under these worsening conditions (Golosov, 2024; Kynev, 2024); however, the overall major decline of Russian political science (as well as of other social science disciplines) is most probably irreversible (Zavadskaya, Gerber, 2023). Amid the increasing complexity of academic cooperation between Western scholars and their Russian partners (Kangas et al, 2023), and a very problematic lack of opportunities to conduct fieldwork in Russia, the use of intermediaries in Kazakhstan or Armenia to maintain international contacts and the exchange of ideas seems like an imperfect substitution at best. Due to

[5] See https://lcsr.hse.ru/en/ (accessed 25 February 2025)

[6] See https://iims.hse.ru/en/csid/ (accessed 25 February 2025).

[7] For example, the Center for Comparative History and Political Studies at Perm State University was closed in April 2022, and the Department of Political Science at the European University at St. Petersburg was closed in June 2024.

these changes, it is unsurprising not only that some Russia-based scholars and experts have left the field but also that there has been a visible decrease in interest in research on Russia among many Western scholars – some of them even chose to shift their scholarly focus to other areas, such as Central Asia.

Aside from these problems, many of which appear irresolvable at least as of yet, there is a major need for substantive changes in Russian studies. Many concepts and approaches which dominated the scene of research on Russian politics over recent decades have become outdated both in factual and in substantive terms. There are virtually no scholars who continue to consider Russia to be a "normal country" (Shleifer, Treisman, 2004, 2014) after February 2022. Even the recent argument that Russia's political regime has turned from the standard form of authoritarianism ("fear dictatorship") to "spin dictatorship" almost exclusively based on extensive use of propaganda (Guriev, Treisman, 2022) lost its appeal immediately after the appearance of this framework for analysis. At the same time, these new challenges may be seen as a call for major changes in Russian studies – there are several scholarly tasks which need to be resolved simultaneously:

(1) Revision of old theories, aimed at their adjustment to ongoing political, economic, and international dynamics, and development of new ones;

(2) Search for new scholarly methodologies and upgrades to research methods appropriate for the study of the ongoing war and other related phenomena;

and

(3) Finding new empirically convincing evidence, which would help make scholarly analyses more empirically solid and rigorous and avoid unsubstantiated claims.

To what extent can the current research on Russian politics cope with these difficult tasks? What has been done already and what lies ahead?

Old Questions under New Conditions

After February 2022 Russian studies appears to have undergone a major tide of securitization: even topics not directly connected with the war (ranging from the environment to public health) are now

considered through this lens of analysis, while research on topics, primarily related to military and security issues,[8] received a major boost. Under conditions of war, this shift was unavoidable; however, its impact on research on Russian politics is ambivalent, and whether or not this impact will be productive for scholarship will depend upon many factors. The securitization of Russian studies has definitely affected the scholarly search for answers to two eternal questions of Russian politics which first emerged in the nineteenth century – "who is to be blamed?" (in this case, for the Russian authoritarian drift and for the military assault on Ukraine) and "what is to be done?" (in this case, in order to stop numerous war-related disasters and counter numerous pernicious trends). As of yet, scholars' answers to both questions are rather imperfect.

Scholarly assessments of Russian politics often fall between excessively shallow and excessively deep explanations, and the analysis of current affairs is no exception. One pole is excessively shallow, as it revolves almost exclusively around the personality of Putin and his past trajectory in the Soviet security apparatus, his experience at the St. Petersburg city hall during the 1990s, and the like (Aslund, 2019). Analyses of this type consider the many pernicious developments in Russia to be induced only by Putin and his close entourage, and the Russian assault on Ukraine is perceived mostly as a projection of the preferences, misperceptions, fears, and grievances of one man in the Kremlin. Such a view on Russia, in a way corresponds with a statement made by Russia's top official, chair of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, who once proclaimed: "if there is Putin, there is Russia; if there is no Putin, there is no Russia".[9] Such a view, however, is certainly insufficient for full-fledged explanations, as it is overly focused on a particular figure. Scholars rarely equate the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 with just Lenin and Trotsky, or the Soviet collapse in 1991 with just Gorbachev and Yeltsin. In a similar way, consideration of contemporary Russia only in terms of "Putinology" (Frye, 2021) is rather unproductive, as recent developments in Russia were caused not only by Putin but also by major segments of the Russian political class. The Survey of Russian Elites quite convincingly illustrates these dynamics in the preferences of Russian elites between 1993 and 2020 (Rivera, 2020), as both political support for authoritarianism and aggressive militarism were shared by a significant proportion of the Russian elites well before the February 2022 attack on Ukraine. Without denying Putin's pivotal role in the conversion of these ideas into authoritarian drift and military actions, one must admit that Putin was not alone. The ideas of the possibility and desirability of durable authoritarianism and of the assault on Ukraine, in a way, reflected the visions, preferences

[8] On these issues, see also the chapter by Kirill Shamiev in this volume.

[9] See 'Volodin: rossiyane vosprinimayut ataki na prezidenta RF kak ataki na svoyu stranu', *TASS*, 22 October 2014 https://tass.ru/politika/1525655 (accessed 25 February 2025).

and desires of the Russian political class as a whole (on the analysis of evolution of Russian elites, see Yakovlev, 2021).

Quite the opposite of the excessively shallow view is the excessively deep view on Russian politics. It tends to comprehensively condemn Russia – both the state and society – as eternally, inherently, and irreversibly imperialistic, militaristic, and anti-Western. Thus, the military assault on Ukraine is perceived as a side effect of Russia's past, of its imperial and/or colonial legacies, of real and/or imagined features of Russian culture, of its geo-political and geo-economic determinism, of its eternal drive to anti-modernization, and the like. However, this approach, deeply embedded in many historical (Pipes, 1974) and contemporary (Hedlund, 2005) writings, is misleading. It not only ignores or downplays many successful episodes of Russian liberalization in the past – both pre-1917 and in the late twentieth century – but also assumes that Russia as a country cannot be improved by any means and is worthy only of total elimination in one way or another. The perception of Russia as a quintessential and eternal global evil is understandable today due to the fury of many observers after Russia's violent attacks on Ukraine. However, this approach should not be considered a reliable analytical tool because it aims at accusations (Gudkov, 2022; Snyder, 2022) instead of explanations, and impartial scholarly analysis should not be replaced by emotional punditry. Speaking in a more comparative-historical way, no serious analysts today tend to condemn Germany for Nazism or believe that Germany cannot be improved after Nazism in any possible way, even though such a view was rather popular during the period of World War II and immediately after it.

Overall, the dichotomy of excessively shallow and excessively deep explanations for Russia's post-Communist trajectory to a certain degree reflects the fundamental gap that has developed in recent decades between structure-induced and agency-driven approaches to the analysis of Russian politics (Gel'man, 2015b; Orttung, 2023). However, the fruitful integration of these approaches (which should be complementary rather than mutually exclusive) remains a major weak link in the research agenda of Russian studies, which is still focusing on blame – either Putin is guilty, or Russia is guilty, or both. Instead, evidence-based explanations addressed to mid-range theories would be more productive for a scholarly understanding of Russian politics.

As to the question "what is to be done?", the number of policy-oriented products by scholars of Russia, addressed both to policy makers and to the mass public, skyrocketed after 2022. Policy memos and briefs, analytic reports, and projected scenarios, as well as op-eds, public debates, pamphlets and open letters, often produced in very emotional styles, flooded the field and at least for a while dominated the intellectual landscape of Russian studies. This trend demonstrated a sharp contrast with the period of the Cold War, when many Sovietologists (with some notable exceptions,

such as Zbigniew Brzeziński or Richard Pipes) did not particularly attempt to influence policy making towards the Soviet Union and rather pragmatically used the demand of policy relevance to support their own academic ventures (Engerman, 2009). It is hard to judge to what extent academia had and will have an impact on post-2022 policy towards Russia in the US and/or in Europe (most probably, not much), but the increasing gap between the normative stances of many scholars and experts and the pragmatic interests of decision-makers is very observable and highly likely to continue in the future.

Against this background, several directions of the search for the roots of Russia's trajectory and remedies against the war deserve further exploration. First, discussion of the post-Communist transition in Russia during the 1990s suddenly restarted in 2024: after Alexei Navalny's death, his followers released a series of videos which explored the argument that Russia's reforms in the 1990s were the point of departure for authoritarianism and the revival of imperial militarism in Russia (Navalny, 2023).[10] These videos provoked a heated public response, mostly politically motivated, and this discussion was perceived not only as shifting the blame for the drift into authoritarian militarism in Russia to the reformers of the 1990s but also as a major revision of existing narratives of post-Communism by the younger generation of the Russian opposition (Zharkov, 2024). Despite these political tensions, the role of the legacy of the 1990s in Russia's political trajectory in the twenty-first century remains under-explored and under-theorized. The liberal mainstream considers the "roaring" 1990s in Russia to have been a generally correct, even if imperfect form of transition (Shleifer, Treisman, 2004), which was severely distorted and later on failed mostly due to the poor choice of Putin as Yeltsin's successor (Aslund, 2019). In turn, their leftist opponents argue that the market reforms of the 1990s paved the way to the rise of "neo-liberal autocracy" (Kagarlitsky, 2002) and that Russia's trends in the Putin era were a logical continuation of such a neo-liberal approach (Matveev, 2024). Both of these narratives, however, are rather imperfect. They tend to ignore the comparative dimension of transition – in fact, market reforms, with their subsequent decline in living standards, rise of inequality and ubiquitous corruption, were somewhat similar in all post-Communist countries, whereas Russia's post-transition trajectory was qualitatively different in many ways. In addition, participants in these discussions tend to overemphasize the role of structures or agencies in Russia's drift to authoritarianism and militarism without attempts to find a healthy scholarly balance between them (Orttung, 2023). Still, the turn to more in-depth accounts of Russia's contemporary

[10] See, in particular, *Istorya bol'shogo zagovora: kto i kak zakhvatil Rossiyu. Predateli, film 1*, 16 April 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_wMvLpOnPQ (accessed 25 February 2025)

history as a source of recent political developments should be welcomed, as there is a need to discuss these matters in a more systematic way (Gel'man, 2025).

Second, "decolonization" became a new catchword of Russian studies, incredibly popular in the post-2022 environment. It resonates with the "progressive" leftist narrative, which tends to place all the blame for the poor state of affairs in various corners of the globe on the shoulders of former European colonial powers as well as of the United States. In this respect, decolonization has contributed to accusations that Russia is pursuing a neo-imperialist approach towards the countries of the former Soviet Union. The call for decolonization, which initially concentrated on broadening the cultural focus of research instead of overconcentration on the Kremlin and the Russian elites, and on taking into account many developments in other parts of Eurasia, soon became an element of politics within academia. It led to loud demands to divert resources from the study of Russia to the study of other parts of Eurasia, ranging from Ukraine to Central Asia (Shaipov, Shaipova, 2023). Such demands, despite all arguments in their favor, appear problematic in the light of the war-driven "know your enemy" approach and implied policy relevance of research. Some scholars and experts tend to propose the punishment and humiliation of Russia under the guise of "decolonization" (Budraitskis, 2023), which seems more like a political statement than a research program. Furthermore, some critically minded authors have even considered the "decolonization" of Russia through the lenses of high expectations of its territorial disintegration in the future (Etkind, 2023), although reputable specialists have noted that these expectations are groundless and not based on any reasonable evidence (Golosov, 2024; Kynev, 2024).

Third, the analysis of sources and mechanisms of Russia's political and economic resilience despite exogenous shocks and war-driven domestic and international challenges has become a very important direction of research on Russian politics. Indeed, neither the special military operation's unfulfilled promises of demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine, nor major economic sanctions and the loss of revenues from oil and gas export, nor any other war-related challenges and crises have undermined the Russian political regime's ability to pursue its goals in the domestic and international arenas. At least at the time of writing of this article, the Kremlin appears nearly invincible despite increasing problems on the economic, technological, demographic and other fronts. While some scholars tend to consider the major role of the nation-wide state bureaucracy and business actors in Russia's resilience (Yakovlev, 2024), others pay particular attention to the role of elites in Russia's regions and cities and their impact on the persistence of the political, economic and societal status quo (Busygina, 2024; Klimovich, 2024; Shkel, 2025). There is no doubt that evidence-based empirical analyses of this type, based on a positive rather than normative scholarly perspective, are

not only policy relevant but tell us more about the political economy of the war and the resilience of authoritarianism in Russia and beyond than numerous endless public discussions of the potential sources of Russia's defeat or victory.

Challenges and Traps

The veil of secrecy, which covers many details of post-2022 Russian domestic politics, alongside many problems of interpretation of available yet imperfect and incomplete data, has become a major hindrance for empirical research. In a way, such problems are not so dissimilar to those of Sovietology during the Cold War, when a shortage of information regarding the Soviet Union contributed to numerous misinterpretations among scholars and experts (Engerman, 2009). It is no wonder that some scholars have expressed major concern that causal identification research design, which now prevails in various social science disciplines, will be no longer available in post-2022 Russian studies (Libman, 2023). However, in the twenty-first century the nature of these problems and their solutions has changed a great deal.

To some extent, the rise of digital research on Russia in various formats (Gritsenko et al., 2021) and the further development of computational social science techniques in Russian studies (Bessudnov, 2024) compensated for numerous shortages and gaps in information vital for research, especially under post-2022 conditions. Scholars and experts were able to decipher various digital data made by state actors, businesses and ordinary people, and effectively analyze them through the use of diverse open data, ranging from social media networks to official statistics (such as excess mortality records, first during the COVID-19 pandemic and then during the war). The Russian assault on Ukraine became a catalyst for these processes and further contributed to the rise of online area studies in general and Russian studies in particular, with their own research agendas. Moreover, post-2022 Russian studies tend to employ new open source intelligence methods (also known as OSINT analytics), which were previously used mostly by hackers, journalists, and activists.[11] These methods have high potential for a fruitful integration into political research on Russia and beyond (Limonier, 2023). Although the new sub-field has faced many challenges and raised some concerns (Kalsaas, 2023), there is no doubt that digital research will develop further, and Russian studies may become a testing ground, if not a new launching pad, for these methodological innovations.

[11] On these issues, see also the chapter by Anselm Schmidt and Sanshiro Hosaka in this volume.

Research on the political attitudes of Russian people became yet another contentious issue in the field. Immediately after February 2022, observers were puzzled by the fact that mass surveys demonstrated a high degree of public support for the Russian assault on Ukraine among ordinary Russians, in the manner of "rally around the flag," amid a decline in the response rate in these surveys (Reisinger et al.., 2023). Scholars of survey research proposed some new methodological solutions to these problems (Rosenfeld, 2023), continued their collaboration with Russia-based pollsters (such as the Levada Center), and conducted new studies of Russians' attitudes (Frye et al, 2024). Moreover, they successfully utilized some opportunities for the use of quasi-experimental survey design in survey research under new conditions (Zakharov et al, 2024).[12] However, proponents of interpretive research questioned the validity of survey data in Russia (and of quantitative social science in general) and called for reliance upon qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations as the most relevant research methods for the new situation in Russia (Morris, 2023). Indeed, scholars from the Public Sociology Laboratory, who extensively used these methods for in-depth analysis of changing attitudes of ordinary Russians towards the war, gathered outstandingly valuable field materials (Erpyleva, Kappinen, 2024). However, by all academic standards, various research strategies are usually considered complementary rather than mutually exclusive, and this is why different efforts to gather evidence on present-day Russian politics should be welcomed.

Although this discussion is important in methodological terms, its implications went far beyond approaches and techniques of data gathering and analysis of attitudes of the Russian mass public. Irrespective of the positivist or interpretive orientations of scholars, one may ask a more fundamental question: to what extent do ordinary people matter in politics in general and under conditions of repressive authoritarian militarism in particular? Or, rather, may the mass public in Russia and beyond be considered just an instrument in the hands of powerful elites (or counter-elites), while its political agency is so negligible that the masses may not be seriously taken into account in the study of the Russian political regime (Gel'man, 2015b)? Such a question has not yet become part of the research agenda of Russian studies, although related matters are definitely worth more systematic in-depth analysis, both theoretically and empirically.

While scholars of Russian studies attempted to cope with methodological and empirical challenges under post-2022 conditions, their efforts to conceptualize developments in Russia (not only after

[12] The regular monthly survey by the Levada Center was conducted during the exact days of Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny in June 2023, and scholars received a unique opportunity to compare survey data on public support for persons and institutions just before and after the mutiny. The data analysis demonstrated no major changes, however.

February 2022, but also in a broader scholarly perspective) have faced two major traps. First is the trap of making big and sweeping generalizations of current trends and ongoing changes amid numerous uncertainties and incomplete and imperfect information. Due to these constraints, many generalizations of this kind, especially when they consider current affairs against the background of scholarly interpretations of the entirety of Russian history (Etkind, 2023), risk being highly premature and insufficiently empirically grounded. Such tendencies are mostly driven not by academia as such but rather by demands made by the media of scholars, who tend to be perceived as omniscient and all-knowing gurus, if not prophets. Some scholars, in turn, are eager to play these roles, which are often incompatible with academic research. Such demands are very tempting, and some academic celebrities achieve major recognition due to their loud public claims, despite (or even thanks to) the questionable academic validity and numerous biases of these claims: in this respect, post-2022 Russian studies are not an exception (Snyder, 2022; Chomsky, 2023).

Second, there is an ongoing spread of the disease of scholarly forecasting of the future of Russia, Ukraine, Europe, and the entire world amid the ongoing war. Such an enterprise (driven by the same media demands) is understandable but hardly productive for scholarship, and forecasting is always at risk of producing numerous wrong expectations. After all, there is no magic crystal ball in the scholar's arsenal, and even the best and brightest research centers hardly resemble the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Although the most experienced and clever scholars hedge their bets and offer several mutually exclusive scenarios in their forecasts (Kotkin, 2024), the overall diverting of scarce intellectual and material resources to making predictions about Russia is not always useful (for an overview of previous experiences of forecasting Russia's future, see Bacon, 2012). Furthermore, scholars are often not much better in their forecasting than, say, fiction writers.[13] Judging by the experience of Sovietology, one might argue that predictions of the Soviet collapse, occasionally made well before Gorbachev's perestroika, also faced the same trap. While Andrei Amalrik (1970) was factually incorrect in expecting the Soviet collapse by 1984, triggered by Soviet-Chinese military rivalry, he offered a very perceptive substantive interpretation of the dividing lines within the Communist system and its major vulnerabilities, and many of them proved to be relevant. In contrast to him, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse (1979) almost correctly predicted the Soviet collapse by 1990 in factual terms, but her expectations were based on rather misleading interpretations of

[13] In his posthumously published novel *The Command Authority* (2013), the bestselling American fiction author Tom Clancy correctly predicted the Russian annexation of Crimea and the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine over Donbas. No scholars had made any predictions of this kind, as the major changes came unexpectedly for many observers.

Soviet domestic politics – she predicted a rise in militant Islamism and violent separatism in Soviet republics of Central Asia, driven by demographic changes.[14] As one can see, both predictions were wrong, albeit for very different reasons. One must admit that for good or for ill, any scholarly predictions about Russia's future under current conditions may become incorrect both in factual and substantive terms.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Avenues for Further Research

To summarize, developments in Russian studies after February 2022 came contrary to the extraordinary nature of the ongoing war, in spite of its own academic trajectory, and did not meet either the best or the worst expectations under changing domestic and international political conditions. Research on Russian domestic politics has faced numerous problems and still lacks many reliable instruments for their analysis, but scholars continue their efforts to gather, analyze and interpret new data on various aspects of Russian politics and society, and have laid some grounds for further advancements. One should not expect an immediate academic breakthrough in the field given all the political, informational and institutional constraints stated above, but based on information about ongoing research projects, one can be moderately optimistic about the future of Russian studies. In this respect, some modest suggestions may be useful for scholarly discussions and for developing avenues for further research.

The exogenous shock of February 2022 led to a major shift in many discussions on Russian politics towards a normative focus – condemning the Kremlin became nearly universal among international scholars and experts. It gave birth to numerous reactions and responses to the war through which specialists in the field demonstrated their stances towards it. However, such an approach, virtuous as it may be, cannot substitute for a scholarly research agenda. Meanwhile, the normative perspective is not always productive for research as we have to analyze not how Russian politics should (or, rather, should not) develop but how and why Russian politics actually functions in its current form. Regardless of our normative views, we are forced to answer the question "why?", whether we want it or not. We have to address questions of how the Kremlin manages the war, the economy, and society at large, why it is able to cope with so many simultaneous domestic and international challenges, what the strengths and vulnerabilities of Russian political mechanics are, and the like. In

[14] After the Soviet collapse in 1991, Carrere d'Encausse received outstanding academic recognition and became a member and later on a permanent secretary of the French Academy, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the academic value of her forecast was dubious at best.

other words, refocusing the research agenda from a normative to a positive perspective of scholarly research on Russian politics is a primary task for specialists.

Furthermore, contrary to the tendency to perceive political developments in contemporary Russia as a unique and exceptional case of failed democratization and construction of a new aggressive neo-imperial state, there is a serious need to put this case into a broader theoretical and comparative-historical framework of analysis in a systematic way. Examples of this approach in the study of post-Soviet Russian politics before 2022 have been relatively rare (Derluguian, 2005; Hanson, 2010; Gaidar, 2012), but the potential for this kind of research is very high. For example, the ongoing war against Ukraine could probably be best conceptualized in Tillyan historical sociological perspective as an episode of state-making and unmaking. His maxim of "war made the state, and the state made war" (Tilly, 1975: 42) is very relevant in the current context in regard to both Russian and Ukrainian post-imperial state building under conditions of entrenched and protracted bad governance in these two countries (Gel'man, 2022). The problem is that such an agenda of in-depth comparative-historical research would require addressing key questions of post-imperial nationalism, of international integration (or, in case of Russia, of detachment), of breakdowns of modernization processes, and the like. Studies of this kind are quite time-consuming, and they cannot bring significant fruit in the short run, here and now, especially given all the pressures in academia and beyond. However, this agenda is worth pursuing as a potential source of major academic advancements in the study not only of contemporary Russian politics, but of politics and societies across the globe.

Finally, despite the very gloomy current state of affairs in Russian politics, and the many problems and concerns involved in researching it, there should be no grounds for falling into the deadly sin of sloth, which is always counter-productive, including in academia. Scholars of Russian studies may consider the ongoing crisis of the war and its related pernicious effects not only as a sign of the hopelessness and senselessness of Russia. Instead, one might consider this crisis as an opportunity to use the multi-dimensional challenge of our times to raise new scholarly questions and search for new answers for further research in Russian studies and beyond. If this approach to research on Russian politics prevails in the foreseeable future, then political science research in general and Russian studies in particular will be on the right track.

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