

Russian Studies' Moment of Self-Reflection

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INTRODUCTION

The Future of Russian Studies

The articles in this issue of the RAD explore transformations of the Russian Studies field. Some of these were already under way before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine but have been accelerated by the war and its impact on the field. The approaches identified here include the need for a thicker conceptualization of Russia that gives the floor to more interpretative methods and seeks to refine existing approaches; an expansion of the tools used to study Russia, including digital techniques and open-source data; and the need for horizontal cooperation platforms to deal with the new Iron Curtain.

The concepts and methods analyzed here add to the discussion of how to study Russia recently published by the journal *Post-Soviet Affairs* and are at the core of the recently launched [Russia Program](#) at the George Washington University. We hope they will stimulate new and more nuanced discussions of how best to understand what is happening in Russia today and the key drivers shaping its future development.

ANALYSIS

Russian Studies' Moment of Self-Reflection

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Russia's war against Ukraine has generated seismic waves for the Russian Studies field. These are largely driven by a need for collective reflection on the field's systemic features, place in global academia, internal imbalances, and blank spots.

This is not to say that the field has "failed" and should embark on all-out self-blame. First, faced with the accusation of a "failure to predict" the war, one can argue that prediction is not the primary mission of social science, and that the field of Russian political-military studies did in fact accurately predict the military invasion. Second, as Frye has demonstrated, the field has made major scholarly achievements, especially when it comes to integrating some aspects of post-communist/post-socialist "area studies" with statistical, experimental methods and the segment of comparative political science that has been influenced by political economy. Still, some structural features of the field cry out for introspection, especially during periods of exogenous shocks; the *Post-Soviet Affairs* special issue of late 2022 provides a masterful display of the fertility of such an exercise.

The first feature that appears central is the field's geographical siloing and power hierarchy. At least in the social science domain, Anglophone Russian Studies are largely autarkic, existing with little knowledge of (or at least reference to) what is produced outside of the English-speaking world. The very limited references made

to the Russian-language literature belie the richness of Russian publications, as any visit to such Russian intellectual hotspots as the Falanster bookstore in Moscow would have shown—at least until the onset of the full-scale war. And this does not even take into account what is published in Russia's regional capitals, whose publishing markets are segregated from those in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Even within so-called "Western" academia, publications in French, German, and other national languages rarely transcend their national borders to be engaged by the English-speaking literature. By contrast, history and literature seem to have been better able to integrate locally produced scholarship.

A second feature is that in contrast to old "Sovietology," social scientists working on contemporary Russia are rarely invited to train in and enter into dialogue with the humanities. How many U.S. political scientists studying Russia have read Viktor Pelevin? More globally and more structurally, social sciences struggle to put into practice their self-proclaimed commitment to multidisciplinary, or at least crossdisciplinary. Segments of Anglophone political science on Russia, by stressing the need for causal identification study designs, have contributed to an overreliance on data from surveys with experimental designs at the expense of interactions with history, cultural anthropology, sociology, or geography. Here, too, the segregation is largely inter-

nal to the “Western” and especially Anglophone realm: Russian publications display much deeper cross-disciplinary approaches. And except in such marginal sub-fields as Russia’s Arctic policy, climate change, and sustainability policy, there is even less dialogue between the social sciences, geography, and the natural sciences.

A third feature relates to the succession of prisms or lenses used on Russia that have created distortions in analyses. At least four such prisms can be identified. First is a Putin-centric prism that entails looking at Russia through its president, his professional background, his inner circles, trying to identify his ideological gurus, illuminating his supposedly “irrational mindset,” or offering purely instrumentalist analysis of the regime.

Second is a Moscow-centric vision of Russia in which the capital city and its more liberal-minded residents obscure regional perspectives, which are often ideologically more diverse and are generally more nuanced. Similarly, internationally well-connected Russian scholars from the two capitals are frequently seen as the only legitimate “Russian voices” —because they are the only ones known in the West and able to speak its language, both literally and symbolically.

Third is an ethnic Russian-centric reading of Russia in which the ethnic minorities who were so intensively studied in the 1990s have become one of the blank spots of research. This contributes to the difficulties of capturing potentially “hidden scripts” of resentment—aggravated by the general Western lack of knowledge of Russia’s national languages and the marginalization of identity politics, seen as a “sub-area” that cannot explain Russia’s general features.

Last but not least is a Western-centric prism imposed on Russia, its regime and society, which are always compared to the West’s as the obvious normative benchmark. This approach, which treats the West as the only mirror of Russia, blatantly excludes views of Russia from non-Western perspectives. Scholars from countries neighboring Russia have increasingly called to be recognized as

agents in interpreting Russia on the basis of their own experiences. Scholars from the Global South, too, look at Russia and at the West through their own prisms and experiences, including a vivid postcolonial approach.

Where do we go from here?

Acknowledging academic inequalities in knowledge production—of which there are many—would be a first step. The most obvious starting-point is probably that native scholars and indigenously produced work should be acknowledged as critical additions to the field that cannot be ignored. But there are other knowledge hierarchies, too: of English-speaking works over non-English ones; of Western-centric views over those from the post-Soviet world and from the “Global South”; of political science—the “reigning” discipline through which (Western) understandings of the Russian regime and society are developed—over sociology, cultural anthropology, history, and the humanities.

A second step would be to favor more granular and grassroots approaches that would allow for *thicker* conceptual knowledge. The *Post-Soviet Affairs* special issue shows us the path: it would entail, among other things, changing the questions we ask; being cognizant of the issues related to aggregative approaches and the need to blend survey data with qualitative analysis; going back to long-neglected ethnographic methods; looking at societal transformations over the course of generations; focusing on vulnerable segments of the population (both classes and ethnic groups); borrowing from social psychology to study resentment-based politics and collective emotions; and opening up to new comparative frameworks.

This is a transformative time for the Russian Studies field. Russia scholars have the opportunity—and duty—to both rethink the systemic features of their field and to contribute to changing the lenses applied to Russia in the hope of contributing modestly to new pathways for the peaceful coexistence of the nations that share the Europe-Asia continent.

About the Author

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