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An Online Network Solution to Fieldwork in Russia

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Abstract

Russia's war against Ukraine prevents most Western scholars from doing fieldwork in the country. In this difficult situation, digital tools can help to compensate for the inability to travel.

Conducting Research in Difficult Conditions

One of the consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is that it is no longer feasible for most Western scholars to travel to Russia to conduct field research or access empirical sources in archives or other repositories. Under conditions of full-scale war, Western scholars' inability to conduct research on the ground, combined with Russia-based scholars' loss of international contacts, means that our understanding of political, social, and economic processes in the country will suffer, as will our understanding of the historical, literary, and day-to-day context.

Although less effective than in-person fieldwork, the use of digital techniques can help restore some of the access that has been lost. Thanks to contemporary technology and the way Russia's pre-war digital sphere developed, the new barriers are permeable to online networks and cooperation platforms. In this article, I discuss a methodology and general principles for organizing remote archival research using a variety of existing networks and platforms.

In January 2022, Alexander Auzan, the dean of Moscow State University's Economics Department, published a book on the cultural codes of the Russian economy. Although he did not anticipate full-scale war in Ukraine, Auzan argued that government investments in the military-industrial complex had reduced society's trust in state institutions and pushed many people to shift to the digital sphere, where they could establish horizontal relations with collaborators. Cooperation on digital platforms provides greater security to Russians because these platforms offer more tools for avoiding state interference.

Russian willingness to engage in digital horizontal relations is the key to transcending the new Iron Curtain. Many Western-minded scholars and graduate students remain in Russia and are open to continuing cooperation in the trustworthy atmosphere of digital platforms. While extensive contacts with Russian colleagues before February 24 and the recent mass exodus of intellectuals facilitate network-building, the main problem is establishing, testing, and introducing cooperation procedures

and protocols that will make remote research assistance effective in the context of war. The initial impetus for creating remote research assistance networks was to overcome COVID-related travel restrictions. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this method remains the only window to fieldwork in Russia.

Dilemmas for Researchers

There are two significant dilemmas to be addressed before launching research cooperation with Russians. First, does it make sense to continue research activities with Russians regardless of their attitudes toward the war? There is no straightforward answer to this. On one hand, the European research agencies cut all research ties with Russia. On the other, U.S. corporations and some institutions, especially in medical studies, continue to launch new research projects in Russia and transfer money to sponsor these efforts despite the war. On purely technical topics such as medicine, the Russian state welcomes the continuation of research with Western partners and many of the restrictions come from the Western side. The Russian state, however, frequently targets social scientists for prosecution, charging them with bringing Western ideological values to Russia. Arguably, the final decision depends on evaluating one's a) research impact versus the possible consequences of cooperating with someone in Russia; b) approach to Russians as a collective or individuals; and c) opinion on whether a full blockade or targeted support for individual partners will help to accelerate the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty and facilitate change in Russia.

The issue of political risks also has to be taken into consideration. Currently, all scholars on the Justice Ministry's list have delivered prominent public anti-war messages. A recent Sistema investigation on surveillance demonstrates that the government targets public expressions and not actual cooperation with the West. Nevertheless, while individual academic cooperation has not been targeted to date, this policy could change at any moment and there is no guarantee that a daring counterintelligence lieutenant would not try to report collaborative work on 19th-century diaries as an act of espionage. Moreover, there is professional pressure being

applied inside higher education institutions that is more subtle and difficult to perceive from the outside. Individual Russian scholars are best positioned to decide how much risk they are willing to tolerate in pursuit of their research work.

Practical Advice

How can Western scholars organize remote fieldwork in collaboration with peers in Russia? In the best-case scenario, Western and Russian scholars would work together to identify research questions that are of mutual interest and promote each collaborator's research agenda. If, however, a Western scholar would simply like to access materials in Russia that are no longer accessible to them, finding a person willing to take the risk of embarking on research cooperation with Western scholars is not the most difficult problem. In this case, the success of remote fieldwork depends not on selecting a seasoned professional who can go to an archive, but on preparing a clear and detailed task order for a person who is *excited* about the opportunity to cooperate and is not afraid to dive into an externally defined topic even without proficiency in it. Almost all major Russian archives have online catalogs that would be a good source for preparing a detailed research plan. Those that do not have such catalogs make available a service for searching relevant documents. Half of one's success in remote archival research depends on the preparation of a detailed Excel sheet that explicitly states the document title, archival code, number of pages, and year, and has a clear description of research needs and keywords/last names/topics. A task order—that is, an online Excel document with hyperlinks to cloud folders for scans or pictures of each document—will be an effective guide even for an inexperienced research assistant.

Where can a person to fulfill the task order be found? Personal networks in Russia; professional communities on Facebook, such as FHC Moscow; and existing cooperation platforms are the best places to find a good candidate. Graduate students are often less biased than seasoned professionals. Graduate students and young scholars are also frequently more transparent about their political attitudes, so a simple scroll through a potential collaborator's personal social media page can obviate the need for a conversation about their ethical positions. Finally, the new generation of researchers is open to adopting electronic solutions for project management.

Paying partners in Russia, communicating securely with them, and keeping track of assistants' time present a new set of challenges for which there are an array of online solutions. For example, a project might involve time-tracking apps that make it possible for workers to record time spent working in designated locations (i.e., archives), use secure means of communication such as Signal, and transfer money using cryptocurrencies. In practice, however, these steps remain complicated. Most Russians do not use cryptocurrencies and there are only a limited number of banks that permit transfers of conventional money. Most Western universities prohibit any transfers to Russia to avoid potentially violating sanction laws and other guidance issued by national governments. Accordingly, the online tools available are at best only workarounds for a difficult situation.

One of the goals of the Russia Program at GW is to connect Russian scholars and graduate students and their Western counterparts on a single platform and help them to build fruitful research relations, especially when it comes to traditional on-site investigations such as archival or library research, in order to develop scholarship without borders.

About the Author
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