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Russia's Ambivalent Pathways

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

About the Author

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

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

Social Capital

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

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

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

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

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