

How to Study Russia Anew?

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A farewell to

- Russia – NATO enhanced and prioritized relations
- EU – Russia strategic partnership
- Russia's 'soft power' (from Sochi Olympics and FIFA World Cup to the 'Russian world' doctrine)
- Russia's institutional engagement with region-building (withdrawal from the Council of Baltic Sea States and expulsion from the G8)
- Post-Soviet frame of reference

A bunch of novel questions

- **Most of us didn't expect RU to start the war – therefore, we missed something**
- **Many didn't expect UA to effectively resist the aggression – therefore, we again missed something**
- **Many were looking at the Moscow – Minsk relations as a peculiar form of economic integration, and largely failed to predict security repercussions**

Why do we need a re-examination of Russia Studies?

- A *cognitive* problem: Russian political system transformed much beyond the bulk of academic predictions and expectations
- *Practical* problem: a radical extension of the possible options and scenarios in the future (some of them were considered antiquated / outdated, such as territorial reshuffling or nuclear war)
- These transformations require a new language (many notions don't seem to be sufficient anymore)
- A new *polarization* in the Russia debate (examples: "Putin's war" vs "Russia's war", debate on Russian fascism, Russia's potential disintegration, etc.)
- Prevalence of *policy-oriented language* over academic analysis

“Old” Russia Studies

- Russia is part of a wider Europe (history, culture, patterns of consumption, urban life, etc.) – thus, European concepts were considered as applicable to RU (checks and balances, public good, civil society, governance, populism, federalism, etc.)
- Russia is part of a broader transition from communism to democracy
- This transition is not unproblematic (“hybrid regime”) but by and large manageable
- “*Bad*” government deserving critical attitudes and “*good society*” deserving assistance
- Since this transition is patronized by Western institutions (through material incentives and knowledge transfer), the West shares responsibility for its outcomes

New Challenges

- Crisis of Western narratives of Russia's normative and institutional convergence and integration in Europe ('Wandel durch Handel')
- Russia is increasingly seen as a (neo)colonial power with imperial ambitions
- Russia is a deviant / digressing case of the transitological paradigm
- Russian mainstream discourse re-signified many Western concepts and infused different meanings in them ('language games' and perceptual gaps):
 - Integration → spheres of influence ("near abroad")
 - Human rights → Russian speakers abroad
 - Soft power → interference in elections in the West
 - Cultural diplomacy → propaganda
 - Civilization → self-sufficient autarchy
 - Regionalism → keeping "extra-regional powers" at a distance

The conceptual legacy of the 1990s: do we need an academic audit?

Some concepts were absolutized and generalized

- **Constructivist legacy: Intersubjectivity (EU – Russia relations)**
- **Liberal legacy: interdependence (from ‘Wander durch Handel’ to ‘No European security without Russia’)**
- **Post-structuralist legacy: marginality / liminality as a source of positive impulses**
- **Neofunctionalist legacy: comparing European and Eurasian integration**

Russia as a 'Black Box'

- How to study those who don't want to be studied?
- Many traditional methods are not applicable (interviews, participant observation, focus groups, field research)
- Official statistics is sometimes problematic (elections)
- Even more so are opinion polls (how reliable is sociological data in authoritarian countries?)

New Critical Junctures in IR

- A new cycle of the old **realism – liberalism** debate on interests and norms (with new concepts such as ‘Westsplaining’ emerged)
- A new interest to the whole spectrum of issues pertaining to **postcolonialism and decolonization**, paralleled by a growing gap between “Western” and “non-Western” IR
- New facets of the **structure – agency** debate: was Russia’s aggressive retrogression facilitated / shaped by structural factors of a global scale?

What has been done since February 24, 2022

- Three possible pathways
- Rejuvenation of the existing explanatory frameworks (mostly institutionalist)
- Extrapolation of the extant concepts to the field of Russia-produced insecurities
- A search for new meanings of political theories: Do we need a new vocabulary to properly understand and conceptualize the new reality? Do we need to re-signify 'old' concepts – such as performativity, spatiality, temporality, corporeality, etc.? Do we need to better peer into new forms of subjectivity and agency?

Understanding, normalization, rationalization

- Academic discourses tend to avoid externalization of radical differences, and prefer to assimilate and neutralize them
- Dogmatic adherence to the liberal principle of inclusion (example: “no European security without Russia”) and the desire to avoid exclusionary - moralizing or colonizing - attitudes to Russia led to humanization of barbarity
- Claims that the causes of the war should be searched in the imperfections of the hegemonic structure of international society created by the Euro-Atlantic West
- Voices of Russia’s direct neighbors - and therefore experiences of countries that have been colonized and subjugated by Russia in the past - are in minority
- Self-censorship due to a fear of further escalation

How to cope with all this?

- Crisis of Western narratives centred on normative and institutional convergence and integration in Europe should be acknowledged
- The explanatory function of political science should imply a reconceptualization of deviant behavior, which requires more synergy with psychology and sociology. The rogue state phenomenon should be given more attention
- Liberal inclusiveness should be balanced with more consideration of the violent potential of sovereign power
- A greater attention should be paid to the concept of decolonization in its multiple connotations, both liberal and illiberal
- To avoid the pitfalls of self-censorship, we should take discourses even more seriously and avoid playing language games to assuage conflictuality

Sovereignty as

Freedom of
action

Impunity

Exceptionalism

Hierarchy

Privilege

Three main pillars

SOVEREIGN POLITICS OF

Time

Space

Body

TEMPORALITY and HISTORY

- Not just a “sense of time”, but the inclusion of time into political agendas and calculations
- Politics of the past: memory, history, commemoration
- Two specificities of Russia:
 - Linear and uninterrupted temporality (instead of “never again” – “if needed, we can repeat it”);
 - History is not a source of education and lesson-drawing, but a source of glorification and pride

SPATIALITY and BORDERS

- A new spatiality of Russia and its borders: what / where exactly is Russia nowadays? Most of the politically meaningful discourses on Russia are produced beyond it.
- Spaces of insecurity (the Foucauldian *heteretopia*): the so-called 'de-facto states' (unrecognized territories, or "grey spaces") as part of Russia's spatial expansion
- The 'Union State': how economic integration produced a major security threat for the whole Euro-Atlantic international society?
- Orientalization of Russia: an Asian country (was Huntington ultimately right?)
- New spatial dynamic at Russia's western borders that to a large extent functions in the regime of exceptionality (sanctions, cancellation of Schengen visas for Russian citizens, discontinuation of educational, academic and cultural contacts, break of financial relations, etc.)
- Revision of the post-Cold-War regionalism at Europe's edges / margins

CORPOREALITY: THE STATE AND THE BODY

care

BIOPOLITICS

force

ZOEPOLITICS

death

NECROPOLITICS

