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## Editorial: Foresight for democratising Russia?

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“How to look forward into Russian future?” (Gel’man, 2023)

“By co-creating it! By our own contribution!” (MDPI, 2023)

*Future is what we make out of it* – for the author, this is how to engage into futurology while maintaining *human dignity*. A series of editorials (Ahamer, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2023) until now analysed the background of the degrading socio-political evolution in Russia.

### 1 The mental patterns and social dynamics within a society ...

What is the mental pattern steering the events unfolding in front of our eyes? Which paradigms are the driving forces for Russian aggression (Bäcker and Rak, 2022)? Will Putin’s war-waging regime fall by itself (Aslund, 2023)? Is the self-destructive potential sufficient to put an end to an aggression-based statehood (Meduza, 2023d) meanwhile boosting epic devastation (Vogler, 2023) and even global hunger, especially for developing countries (Karner, 2023)?

When marching towards Moscow (Gamio et al., 2023; Schmidt, 2023), Prigozhin openly discarded the main initial argument for starting the war by claiming that “*Ukraine never threatened Russia*” (Meduza, 2023a) and “the war was only started because a few guys wanted to puff themselves up” (Golosov, 2023).

In my view, a key deeply-rooted sentiment of ‘revenge’ against the west [who performs better on so many levels of economy (Radnitz, 2023; Kolodko, 2023)] is supported by large swathes of population (Meduza, 2023b, 2023c; Shcherbak, 2023), thus mirroring Putin’s successful paradigm of anti-Western messianism (Ahamer, 2022) which set out to mentally ‘re-program’ population with well-planned media support, and with pervasive efficiency, steadily ‘trickling down’ to broad societal layers (Grek, 2022). The countermovement would be the so-called ‘Russian World’ (Русский мир) (RM, 2023; Noubel, 2022; Budraitskis, 2022; Guriev and Treisman, 2022) with its outspoken and deliberate anti-democratic approaches (Waller, 2023b; Fomin, 2022).

“History for Putin is an instrument to shape current events. He is absolutely uninterested in historical truth” said Orlov (2023), a leading human rights activist for more than three decades at the head of Memorial (2023), which was shut down in 2021, and on trial himself in July 2023. “For years, Mr. Putin’s regime has deployed all means to re-energize and redirect history” (Cohen, 2023; Putin, 2021; Dugin, 2017).

Will Russian citizens continue to refrain from proactive political action in a self-mutilating act of enduring in silence? [Oushakine, 2016; Hjermann, (2023), p.51]

“Putin’s intention of normalizing the war resonates with domestic depoliticization, a major trend characterizing Russian society which prefers to refrain from engaging with issues of political salience. This phenomenal combination of societal atomization and pragmatic adaptation to any state policy has been conducive to passive justification of the war in Ukraine by most of the population. Immersion in the private sphere, indifference to normative matters, and ignorance of how the world functions beyond Russia are fertile grounds for implicit routinization of the war.” (writes Makarychev, 2023).

By this illustration, he even needs not address the long-contested (Mellish, 2023) hypothesis of Russian servility (Rancour-Laferriere, 1995; Custine, 1843). However, the younger generation often *did* take to the streets (Erpyleva, 2023), including during the 2012 Bolotnya protests (Khlevnyuk, 2023; Snyder, 2018, 2021) – *but this bravery was overruled*, seemingly because it did not echo broader consent and result in wider upheavals. In such self-reassured mono-paradigmatic climate, *incapable of self-correction*, “the war is an extreme example of the highly costly mistakes to which decision-making in this type of regime is prone” (Libman, 2023).

“Putin apparently hopes that he can rely on Orwellian doublespeak to calm the people of Russia about his actions against Wagner as well. As in Soviet times, Russians are being told to believe completely contradictory ideas and historical narratives without any basis in reality. Forget your personal knowledge or experience –the Supreme Guide knows better.” (Khrushchova, 2023)

When looking back to my decades in Russia, the essence of what I perceived there is the *creation of an unconventional, artificial concept of what is real*: not Augustinus’ (354–430) and Thomas Aquinas’ (1225–1274) concept of “*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*” (truth is the adequacy of things and their mental representations in the intellect”) constitutes the *fundamental concept of truth* and thus of a human society (and encourages to discourse, debate and democracy (Haran and Burkovsky, 2023; Ahamer and Mayer, 2013; Ahamer and Schrei, 2006; Glazunova et al., 2023), but rather a *completely new narrative* (or even outlandish myth) *establishes a society*, community, nation, and ideology: Those who *declare they believe our expectations of accepted narratives* are ‘ours’ (= наши = nashi, in Russian and any Slavic language [Petrov, (2023), p.8]) and those who do not declare ‘belief’ fall out of this ‘society’ and deserve to be outlawed and ultimately even poisoned as traitors – the most evil and annihilating verdict when having a secret-agent’s imprinting of consciousness. Notabene, it is by no means required to exactly believe, *only to pretend to believe*. Thus, *the act of pretending is the core of societal constituency* – but nothing within the realm of factualness (Portnikov, 2023). I personally felt that to an unusually high degree, *contemporary Russian identity is constituted on the level of shared narratives* and not on the level of facts. This easily enables everyone to create their own ‘reality’ – and nobody is irritated about an inconsistency of world views (similarly, in a Western court, a person is allowed to lie in order to protect oneself).

**“I suggest here that the deepest root of a society is what a population considers to be ‘truth’.”**

‘Pravda’ (правда), the Russian word for truth, is the title of a notorious USSR leading newspaper that propagated the ideologically driven version of events – thus training a population to believe that truth is determined by those in power; and dissidence leads to Gulags, except if limiting oneself to ‘kitchen dissidentism’ – meaning the political discussions are limited to the private sphere only (Yudin, 2023c). An open debate, or even an act of disbelief or dissidence, automatically catapults an individual out of the sphere of society (Hale, 2014) – similar to the social mechanism of heresy in fundamental Islam (or fundamental versions of other religions).

In fact, I perceive that such society-generating approach equals a very early (namely ‘violet’, i.e., 2nd phase, in terms of Küstenmacher et al.’s (2010) nine-step evolutionary view of civilisations, namely involving sorcerers and clans) pattern constituting a societal consensus (Snegovaya, 2023; Ahamer, 2019, 2020). The 21st-century sorcerers are, in fact, the political technologists, myth providers, even bot-controlled fake-news generators (Pertsev, 2023; Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 2022), and ‘institutes for internet research’ as notoriously linked to Prigogine for decades meanwhile. When I was asked last year to peer-review five academic submissions to a highly-ranking Russian research fund, I saw that three of them belonged to the category of political engineering (such as ideologically influencing BRICS countries in the Russian sense) – but not in methodical, sober science.

What is the societal effect of such narrative of ‘anything can be ‘true’?’ “Over the last 20 years, Putin has done a thorough job of depoliticizing and *atomizing Russian society*” (Rochlitz, 2023) – *nobody trusts no one*. In such a social universe, “the Soviet constitutions were Potemkin façades hiding the realities of the authoritarian regime”, as writes Ledeneva (2023) from University College London, illustrating ‘Russia’s Ambivalent Pathways’.

## 2 ... create factual deeds and real wars ...

The brilliant Russian sociologist Yudin (2023a) in this sense even understands *this war against Ukraine as a systemic necessity* to maintain Putin’s carnivorous state system (Trudoljubov, 2022; Neutatz et al., 2022; Charap and Priebe, 2023; Waller, 2021; Bell, 2023; Dunin-Wąsowicz, 2023). Here, the collective and individual (Harden, 2023) psychological levels mirror each other, in a system-dynamics view:

“On the psychological level, Putin chose to be hurt, which may have something to do with his personality. It is also no coincidence that a person who comes out on top comes with a congenital malaise. As a result, Putin continued to stoke this feeling. And hurt is contagious. It’s a comfortable emotion: first, you feel right all the time, second, undeservedly put down.” (Yudin, 2023a)

He sees that in Russia, “there are no civilizational projects. That’s what makes *Russia totally unattractive* for Ukrainians, and for other countries” (Yudin, 2023b; Elsner, 2023).

The recent (July 2023) end of the Black Sea grain deal leaves even Russian closest ally China in turmoil by shortening and endangering its grain supply (APA, 2023) – given that China receives a quarter of the exported Ukraine wheat (DW, 2023) – not to speak about the dire situation for African countries. Even own friends are hurt badly by such politics.

Any article has to include *experimental data*, and this editorial offers a very small set: My personal ‘experiment’ consisted in addressing my 2019 colleagues among students

and university professors at the oldest Russian university via email, and informing them about the ongoing attack on Ukraine in February 2022 (Mitrokhin, 2023; Masuhr, 2023; Reisner, 2023; Umland, 2023). The outcome of the several email messages to the hundred-some recipients was: 90% no reaction at all, 5% decent answers saying that “they are concerned as well” and 5% starting with a polite sentence and then pouring out the entirety of views as propagated by state news. Thus, overall, an impression may emerge of a largely indulgent society, in a fluidic range between not caring and not daring – consistent with what expert scientists found [Rivera, (2023), p.4; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019; Szostek, 2018; McFaul, 2002]. Petrov (2023, p.11) sees that “the Russian elites are united by their awareness of their illegitimacy.” I even think that one tacit assumption and *precondition for opinion polls is absent* in Russia: a predefined, argument-based and well-articulated political opinion of the population, which could be considered as a starting point for policy making (Waller, 2023b). Rather, the other way round, individual opinions seem as a product of propaganda and political engineering, at least in an overcritical percentage of sub-population.

“Putin and his enablers’ destruction of Russia’s once-burgeoning civil society, media, and universities has set Russia back by decades. The linkages that had been expanding between Russia and the West have now been severed and are unlikely to be restored.” (Orttung, 2023)

But I suggest a deeper approach: the value of ‘spiral dynamics’, an evolutionist civilisational theory developed by Clare Graves [Combs, 2007; Küstenmacher et al., 2010; Ahamer, (2019), p.2] lies in allowing for percentages of paradigms (numbered 1 to 9 for easy reference) prevalent in a given society – and thus allows us to draw a more realistic picture of Russia’s present-day failure to democratise, by saying: under the present harsh framework conditions, the power of adherents to liberal society is *ineffective* as compared to the power of (willing or unwilling) practitioners of an illiberal society.

Any article has to include methodical discussions, and this editorial offers a very small assessment: While Russian propagandists often undertake morphological comparisons with earlier periods in Russian history (such as the ideologically biased identification of *Smutoye vremya*, *Смутное время*, or time of troubles with the Yeltsin period [cf. Tucker, (2019), p.5]) or a blunt advocacy of Kondratieff cycles, sober research tries to identify structural (Klimovich, 2023; Waller, 2023a; Dollbaum, 2023) framework conditions under which certain socio-political developments are more or less probable.

One voice in this sense is Turchenko (2023) in the high-quality platform Riddle who evaluates that financially the current regime made the (especially poorer) population “believe that the costs of protest are higher than the costs of loyalty.” Similarly, and most soberly, Inozemtsev (2023) in the high-quality platform Dekóder analyses that “in today’s Russia, death on the battlefield is not only an ‘honourable fate’ but also a lucrative risk of one’s life.” “If a man goes to war and dies at the age of 30–35 (i.e., at his best and most active age), his death is economically more advantageous [for his family, my remark] than his continued life.” In an unstable national economy (Kurmanaev, 2023), “the country has been accustomed to death and dying has been made economically attractive.”

### 3 ... but how to democratise in this pattern?

Even though Turchenko (2023) thinks that “Putin’s dictatorship is now not threatened”, still, “in the absence of a military defeat, threats to Putin’s regime can only come from Russian citizens” and “the people need to be politicised and this is the task for the Russian opposition groups”, as especially promoted by Navalny’s “‘*smart voting*’ campaign” [Meduza, 2023e; Turchenko and Golosov, (2022), p.105; Turchenko and Trudolyubov, 2023; Gorokhovskaia, 2019]. Herein, Navalny’s (2023) team’s ‘anti-war campaign’ may bear fruit.

**Future is what we deserve to receive based on our mindsets.**

**Contribute! Contribute by ‘*smart writing*’! Submit your strategy to MDPI (2023)!**

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