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Orttung, Robert W.

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## Balancing Structure and Agency in Studying Russia's Future

Robert W. Orttung (George Washington University)

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### Abstract

Studies of Russian politics tend to focus on the authoritarian system Putin has created or the heroic actions of exemplary individuals fighting against that system. Developing a realistic picture of Russia's future development requires balancing a nuanced understanding of how the system works with a sense of how individuals pursuing their own goals can overcome, evade, and potentially transform the authoritarian strictures currently restraining them.

### Structure and Agency in Russia

While the U.S. intelligence agencies and the Biden administration knew that Russia was going to dramatically expand its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many Russian analysts—including myself—assumed that Russia would not launch a full-scale invasion, for two reasons. First, because the negative consequences of doing so would far outweigh any benefits. Second, because the war would be unpopular with the individuals who make up the population of the Russian Federation, somehow preventing Putin from going forward with it. Unless there are radical changes on the battlefield, however, the war seems likely to continue for many years to come. While there are plenty of other problems in the world that need attention, Russia will continue to be important due to its ongoing war crimes, its efforts to spread authoritarian government beyond its borders, and its potential to cause chaos for the rest of the planet. Western leaders must understand the future trajectory of this country in order to best respond to the threat it poses to global peace and prosperity.

Crucial to this understanding is a sense of the comparative ability of individuals and larger historical forces to shape events in Russia. The first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a good time to reassess how we address this issue.

### Historical Inevitability?

Russia is far from the only place where the question of structure and agency is relevant. A recent article in *Harper's Magazine* made the following point about studies of the Indigenous peoples of North America: "Write only about the rigid structures of oppression and you expunge any sense of possibility. But dwell too much on the agency of the oppressed and you do the opposite: you fail to appreciate the impossibility of the binds in which people found themselves." This warning seems equally applicable to the current situation in Russian Studies.

It is senseless to ignore the iron grip dictator Vladimir Putin currently holds on the country and his ability to shape Russia's future. Despite ruling a diverse country, with an educated population, where the internet is relatively open, he has seemingly made himself untouchable through the use of fear: of being murdered like Anna Politkovskaya, of being arrested like Alexey Navalny, or of being prosecuted simply for walking past a protest where other people are taking a stand. People in Russia know what the limits are and the vast majority try not to end up on the wrong side of them, even as the lines are shifting or blurry.

Despite their concentration of capacity within their own societies, even the great leaders of Russia and other former Soviet countries seem trapped in a system that they have little ability to change radically. In theory, their extensive power at the top of a system in which there is no opposition means that they can do whatever they want to shape the future of their countries. But Eurasian leaders all end up doing the same thing: remaining in power for life and using all available means of repression while sacrificing their country's social and economic development for personal gain. Russia, Belarus, the five Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan, and Georgia fit this model. Most Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Armenian leaders have behaved in similar ways, although active civil societies and meaningful elections have at least brought about rotations in power that offer hope that the system will evolve.

Political science's never-ending fascination with the natural sciences and their generalizable laws certainly makes it tempting to measure Putin's strength by looking at just a few metrics, such as his ability to continue to pay the salaries of the secret police who ensure that no one threatens his grip on power. But the world is a "great deal richer in content and less logically simple or streamlined in structure" than the application of a scientific approach might allow, as Isaiah Berlin pointed out in his 1953 speech "Historical Inevitability." Clearly,

even in a country like Russia, there is room for human agency that goes far beyond the role of a great individual.

### Agency and Its Limits

There are numerous examples of groups that have sought to achieve their own goals in Russia regardless of the Kremlin line. Certainly, the number of open protests has dwindled from its peak in 2011, when Putin announced that he would formally return to the presidency, crushing the hopes of those who thought a second term for Dmitry Medvedev would create new opportunities. Individuals and small groups in Russia promote environmental goals, seek to preserve treasured urban sites, work to help Ukrainian refugees fleeing the fighting, and advocate for myriad other causes. During the Soviet era, uncompromising dissidents fought for freedom of religion, the right to free speech, and even constitutionalism, demanding that the leaders obey their own basic laws.

Many Soviet citizens and Russians today lived and continue to live in a gray space. They neither denounce the regime in morally clear terms nor submit to its efforts to mobilize the public for the war. Whether through simple inaction or by quietly finding ways to subvert regime goals, they push back against the illegitimately elected leadership. The limits of academic freedom in Russia are shrinking, for example, but teachers still find ways to convey their own sense of right and wrong to those students who have developed the skills of critical analysis.

Putin's resort to ambiguity as a method of ruling the country makes this gray space even more murky. Putin does not want to associate himself with unpopular decisions, whether these relate to fighting COVID-19, mobilizing Russian troops, or the details of social policy. He therefore delegates these tasks to subordinates such as Russia's governors, making it possible for the supreme leader to take credit for any successes and lay the blame for failures at the feet of his subordinates. In these conditions, the main type of agency available to subnational politicians in Russia is to do what is expected of them, but using methods of their own devising.

Beyond Russia's borders, Belarus' dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka has likewise found ways to live within the confines of Putin's system but according to his own

limits. He allows Russian troops onto the territory of the country he rules, but has to date imposed limits on Belarus' participation in the war. While Belarus remains closely allied with Russia and depends on it for financial support, it does not do everything that Putin would like it to.

Of course, despite this space for maneuver, one can hardly argue that there is freedom in Russia. Agency exists only within a strictly circumscribed system where policymaking is not subject to democratic accountability.

### How to Study Russia

In this complicated context, where there are strict structural barriers that limit but do not fully extinguish human agency, studying Russia requires clearly delineating what the most important structural variables are and how individuals and groups will be able to work within these constraints to pursue their own goals. Returning to my mistakes in failing to predict the full-scale invasion of 2022, it is important to remember that the Russian system is not deterministic. Russia was not fated to invade its neighbor. Putin might have chosen a different path. Likewise, while structural constraints such as public opinion did not prevent the Kremlin from starting and then expanding the conflict, efforts to limit the costs of the war for the Russian population have likely shaped leaders' conduct of the war, including impelling them to postpone and then limit mobilizations of the population.

Externally, Russia will remain subject to the constantly turbulent drivers associated with climate change, the energy market, and the geopolitical struggle between great powers—such as the US, China, the EU, and India—as well as other countries. Within Russia, the authoritarian system as it functions today limits what kinds of policies can be adopted and how individuals beyond the leader can affect these policies.

The real question is how much agency to attribute to individuals working inside Russia. What techniques can they use to overcome, evade, and possibly eliminate those features of the current system that are impeding Russia from becoming a peaceful neighbor?

#### *About the Author*

*Robert W. Ortung* is a research professor of international affairs at the George Washington University, editor of *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, and a co-editor of the Russian Analytical Digest.