

Russian Nyetworks: Why a Lack of Connectivity Will Be Putin's Main Legacy

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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

from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds to share thoughts and develop new concepts. It would lead a critical examination of the mistakes of the country's leaders with the goal of ensuring that future leaders do not make the same ones. Just as Russia never really came to terms with the crimes of the twentieth century, it is unlikely to critically examine the war crimes of its current leader.

Beyond the domestic system, Putin's war of aggression has eliminated many of Russia's ties with the advanced economies of the West. Some (but not all) Western firms have left the Russian market. Many Western countries have imposed bans on new relationships with Russian universities and many of the exchange programs that once developed strong people-to-people ties no longer operate. This development is a loss for both sides, but particularly hurts Russian universities since their best scholars are leaving for opportunities elsewhere and those who remain are cut off from international networks that promote scholarship.

Atomization

Putin is famous for being a "network of one" with limited access to reliable information, honest advisers, and foreign contacts. His policies, developed in self-imposed isolation after more than two decades in power, are atomizing society in exactly the way that theorists of totalitarianism like Hannah Arendt described during the Stalin era. Now, as then, Russia is a country ruled by fear. A lack of trust among citizens makes it difficult to coordinate collective actions. There are only a handful of street protests, a decline even from the low levels of recent years. People are afraid to connect, much less to express opinions that the Kremlin does not want them to say out loud.

Where can a society like this go from here? We can draw several conclusions. First, given the overall paralysis in Russia, nothing is likely to change until Putin is gone. Most likely, he will remain in power until his death of natural causes. Since most of the ruling elite in Russia depend on his presence to keep the current system in place, there is little chance that insiders will seek to remove him. Even a defeat on the battlefield and

a full withdrawal from Ukrainian territory would likely change little inside Russia.

Second, in the medium term, Russian society is unlikely to move out of stagnation. Most of the country's dynamic people have fled the country, leading to a massive loss of talent. Those who remain must constantly look over their shoulders for fear that they are being monitored. Few are likely to take initiative in such a situation; it is simply safer to do nothing and retreat into the safety of a quiet private life.

Third, the country will become increasingly militarized. The increased levels of conscription and the need to convert factories to military production to replace used weapons will reduce the amount of money available for other investments. Plans for regional development will languish as money is shipped to the front and spent on military purposes. Similarly, the media and education system will be devoted to preparing soldiers willing to sacrifice for their country rather than citizens who have the skills to improve well-being.

Goodbye, Russia

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.

Finland's decision to join NATO marks a dramatic shift in relations with Europe. Ukraine will also likely seek to join NATO, as remaining outside the defensive alliance would leave Ukrainians vulnerable to future Russian attacks and become a source of instability in the heart of Europe. Drawing a bright line between Russia and the West is the only way to prevent future aggression from this country.

Such a prospect irrevocably dashes the hopes for peaceful competition that bubbled up as the Soviet Union collapsed more than thirty years ago. As Western democracies face their own serious troubles, they will probably continue their struggles in growing isolation from Russia.

About the Author

Robert Ortung is a research professor of International Affairs at George Washington University.