

How to Study Russia

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HOW TO STUDY RUSSIA

■ INTRODUCTION	
The Future of Russian Studies	2
■ ANALYSIS	
Russian Studies' Moment of Self-Reflection	2
Marlene Laruelle (George Washington University)	
■ ANALYSIS	
What Open Source Investigations (OSINT) Can Bring to Russian Studies	4
Kevin Limonier (University of Paris 8)	
■ ANALYSIS	
Area Studies Online? Opportunities and Challenges When Researching	
“Digital Russia” during the War on Ukraine	6
Johanne Kalsaas (University of Bergen)	
■ ANALYSIS	
Balancing Structure and Agency in Studying Russia's Future	11
Robert W. Orttung (George Washington University)	
■ ANALYSIS	
An Online Network Solution to Fieldwork in Russia	13
Ivan Grek (George Washington University)	

INTRODUCTION

The Future of Russian Studies

The articles in this issue of the RAD explore transformations of the Russian Studies field. Some of these were already under way before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine but have been accelerated by the war and its impact on the field. The approaches identified here include the need for a thicker conceptualization of Russia that gives the floor to more interpretative methods and seeks to refine existing approaches; an expansion of the tools used to study Russia, including digital techniques and open-source data; and the need for horizontal cooperation platforms to deal with the new Iron Curtain.

The concepts and methods analyzed here add to the discussion of how to study Russia recently published by the journal *Post-Soviet Affairs* and are at the core of the recently launched [Russia Program](#) at the George Washington University. We hope they will stimulate new and more nuanced discussions of how best to understand what is happening in Russia today and the key drivers shaping its future development.

ANALYSIS

Russian Studies' Moment of Self-Reflection

Marlene Laruelle (George Washington University)

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Russia's war against Ukraine has generated seismic waves for the Russian Studies field. These are largely driven by a need for collective reflection on the field's systemic features, place in global academia, internal imbalances, and blank spots.

This is not to say that the field has "failed" and should embark on all-out self-blame. First, faced with the accusation of a "failure to predict" the war, one can argue that prediction is not the primary mission of social science, and that the field of Russian political-military studies did in fact accurately predict the military invasion. Second, as Frye has demonstrated, the field has made major scholarly achievements, especially when it comes to integrating some aspects of post-communist/post-socialist "area studies" with statistical, experimental methods and the segment of comparative political science that has been influenced by political economy. Still, some structural features of the field cry out for introspection, especially during periods of exogenous shocks; the *Post-Soviet Affairs* special issue of late 2022 provides a masterful display of the fertility of such an exercise.

The first feature that appears central is the field's geographical siloing and power hierarchy. At least in the social science domain, Anglophone Russian Studies are largely autarkic, existing with little knowledge of (or at least reference to) what is produced outside of the English-speaking world. The very limited references made

to the Russian-language literature belie the richness of Russian publications, as any visit to such Russian intellectual hotspots as the Falanster bookstore in Moscow would have shown—at least until the onset of the full-scale war. And this does not even take into account what is published in Russia's regional capitals, whose publishing markets are segregated from those in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Even within so-called "Western" academia, publications in French, German, and other national languages rarely transcend their national borders to be engaged by the English-speaking literature. By contrast, history and literature seem to have been better able to integrate locally produced scholarship.

A second feature is that in contrast to old "Sovietology," social scientists working on contemporary Russia are rarely invited to train in and enter into dialogue with the humanities. How many U.S. political scientists studying Russia have read Viktor Pelevin? More globally and more structurally, social sciences struggle to put into practice their self-proclaimed commitment to multidisciplinary, or at least crossdisciplinary. Segments of Anglophone political science on Russia, by stressing the need for causal identification study designs, have contributed to an overreliance on data from surveys with experimental designs at the expense of interactions with history, cultural anthropology, sociology, or geography. Here, too, the segregation is largely inter-

nal to the “Western” and especially Anglophone realm: Russian publications display much deeper cross-disciplinary approaches. And except in such marginal sub-fields as Russia’s Arctic policy, climate change, and sustainability policy, there is even less dialogue between the social sciences, geography, and the natural sciences.

A third feature relates to the succession of prisms or lenses used on Russia that have created distortions in analyses. At least four such prisms can be identified. First is a Putin-centric prism that entails looking at Russia through its president, his professional background, his inner circles, trying to identify his ideological gurus, illuminating his supposedly “irrational mindset,” or offering purely instrumentalist analysis of the regime.

Second is a Moscow-centric vision of Russia in which the capital city and its more liberal-minded residents obscure regional perspectives, which are often ideologically more diverse and are generally more nuanced. Similarly, internationally well-connected Russian scholars from the two capitals are frequently seen as the only legitimate “Russian voices” —because they are the only ones known in the West and able to speak its language, both literally and symbolically.

Third is an ethnic Russian-centric reading of Russia in which the ethnic minorities who were so intensively studied in the 1990s have become one of the blank spots of research. This contributes to the difficulties of capturing potentially “hidden scripts” of resentment—aggravated by the general Western lack of knowledge of Russia’s national languages and the marginalization of identity politics, seen as a “sub-area” that cannot explain Russia’s general features.

Last but not least is a Western-centric prism imposed on Russia, its regime and society, which are always compared to the West’s as the obvious normative benchmark. This approach, which treats the West as the only mirror of Russia, blatantly excludes views of Russia from non-Western perspectives. Scholars from countries neighboring Russia have increasingly called to be recognized as

agents in interpreting Russia on the basis of their own experiences. Scholars from the Global South, too, look at Russia and at the West through their own prisms and experiences, including a vivid postcolonial approach.

Where do we go from here?

Acknowledging academic inequalities in knowledge production—of which there are many—would be a first step. The most obvious starting-point is probably that native scholars and indigenously produced work should be acknowledged as critical additions to the field that cannot be ignored. But there are other knowledge hierarchies, too: of English-speaking works over non-English ones; of Western-centric views over those from the post-Soviet world and from the “Global South”; of political science—the “reigning” discipline through which (Western) understandings of the Russian regime and society are developed—over sociology, cultural anthropology, history, and the humanities.

A second step would be to favor more granular and grassroots approaches that would allow for *thicker* conceptual knowledge. The *Post-Soviet Affairs* special issue shows us the path: it would entail, among other things, changing the questions we ask; being cognizant of the issues related to aggregative approaches and the need to blend survey data with qualitative analysis; going back to long-neglected ethnographic methods; looking at societal transformations over the course of generations; focusing on vulnerable segments of the population (both classes and ethnic groups); borrowing from social psychology to study resentment-based politics and collective emotions; and opening up to new comparative frameworks.

This is a transformative time for the Russian Studies field. Russia scholars have the opportunity—and duty—to both rethink the systemic features of their field and to contribute to changing the lenses applied to Russia in the hope of contributing modestly to new pathways for the peaceful coexistence of the nations that share the Europe-Asia continent.

About the Author

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What Open Source Investigations (OSINT) Can Bring to Russian Studies

Kevin Limonier (University of Paris 8)

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Abstract

For many years, Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) has been the domain of hackers, journalists, and activists. However, it also has the potential to aid researchers focusing on the political or strategic dimensions of contemporary Russia. The integration of these methods is urgently needed, as the war in Ukraine—by making *in situ* fieldwork almost impossible—may create a “phenomenological vacuum” that OSINT can help to fill.

The invasion of Ukraine has deprived many Western researchers of the ability to access Russia for the purpose of conducting fieldwork. This is particularly true for those working on policy or security issues. For them, the impossibility of conducting on-the-ground investigations, along with the disappearance of independent journalism within the country, has created a “phenomenological vacuum” that will be very difficult to fill. In the medium term, they could find themselves in a situation comparable to what their predecessors experienced during the Soviet era, when they could hardly travel to the USSR or had access only to falsified data.

Unless a major political shift occurs, the situation is likely to persist and gradually impoverish our empirical knowledge of contemporary Russia. This is precisely why we need to think of circumvention strategies, even if these will never replace anthropological or sociological research *in situ*. In its day, Sovietology conceived many strategies, both good and bad, for overcoming the extreme difficulty of conducting fieldwork in the USSR. Among these, observation “from the margins” of the country (politically and geographically) was popular and may soon be revived, although this is not relevant to every research topic. Similarly, the use of online sources circumvents part of the problem but creates others: digital censorship makes Runet, the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet, a source of information to be handled carefully.

However, and this is the paradox of the Russian Internet today, it remains a strong vector of emancipation, particularly through the conduct of “digital counter-investigations.”¹ These investigations, which are based on digital footprints collected online, use gaps in the network to identify abuses of power, cases of corruption or political assassination attempts. From the Bellingcat investigation that proved Russian culpability in the destruction of MH17 over Ukraine in 2014 to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny in 2020, many big

Russian stories have been uncovered through the use of advanced digital investigation methods known as OSINT (Open Source Intelligence). Broadly speaking, OSINT refers to a set of methods that make it possible to uncover previously unknown information through the collection and aggregation of data freely available on the Internet. Since the beginning of the war in February 2022, OSINT has become a widespread practice: countless social media accounts have flourished that cover the war live, sharing digital traces generated by combat or other maneuvers. Elsewhere, the activity of the PMC Wagner in Africa is being scrutinized, making it possible for journalists and future investigators working on human rights violations to document Moscow’s “return” to the continent.

Overall, open source digital investigation has become a genre in itself, practiced by journalists, activists, and even magistrates to document political, criminal or strategic phenomena. Researchers, meanwhile, have not yet taken up these techniques, probably for various ethical or methodological reasons. However, there is a real need to think about the use of digital investigation as a strategy for circumventing the dangers and impossibilities of conducting physical fieldwork in Russia.

This is true, first and foremost, because OSINT shares with fieldwork a desire to decipher polity and power relations. Every day, we use a large number of connected machines (smartphones, computers, connected objects) that capture a growing share of our interactions and activities. These omnipresent “sensors” thus record and digitize an infinite number of flows through which the *mots d’ordre* (Deleuze) that constitute the very essence of power, in Foucault’s sense, are spread. There is therefore a need to think of methods for extracting and deciphering the relevant flows and metadata to analyze a given (geo)political phenomenon.

Second, and despite extensive digital censorship, contemporary Russia is probably the largest source of

1 The French journal *Multitudes* has dedicated an entire issue to the emergence of such digital “counter-investigations”: <https://www.multitudes.net/category/l-edition-papier-en-ligne/89-multitudes-89-hiver-2022/>.

OSINT data one can dream of today. This is evidenced by the fact that even the FSB has not been immune to investigations, which exposed its attempts to poison Navalny. The Russian authorities encourage digital control (and thus the production of all kinds of databases), while being deeply corrupt. This results in a profusion of freely accessible leaked data, which are then processed by journalists or experts, as has been the case with the Navalny poisoning and many others.

Finally, many activities within the vast clientelist system that underpins the Russian leadership generate metadata, which can then be collected and studied. For instance, in a paper published in *Post-Soviet Affairs* in 2020, we illuminated the economic and political development pattern of the “Prigozhin galaxy” on the African continent thanks to a meticulous OSINT investigation. Furthermore, Runet’s intermediation platforms allow for the collection of more metadata overall than their Western counterparts, making it possible to conduct large-scale extraction campaigns on VK, Telegram or other networks for the purposes of speech or text analysis.

There is therefore enormous potential to study contemporary Russian power by analyzing the digital traces it generates. However, such “digital fieldwork” cannot become mainstream without the development of appro-

appropriate toolkits for data collection and analysis, as well as related methodological frameworks. It is therefore necessary to consider the development of a comprehensive toolkit that would allow researchers to crawl, scrape, collect, and analyze data from Runet, as well as from the technical bases generally used in OSINT.

This poses a major challenge, as it would require significant technical resources, not to mention the danger posed by the so-called “sovereign Runet” law (FZ90), which gives the Russian authorities the legal means to control all Internet traffic entering and leaving the country. While this vast project of integral network censorship is as yet largely a fiction, it could eventually make it impossible to access certain Russian digital resources from abroad (which would, in turn, necessitate new complex circumvention maneuvers).

Finally, the manipulation of digital traces collected on the Runet for academic research purposes raises numerous ethical questions that remain as yet unanswered. For example, what about the countless data leaks from the Russian state apparatus? Although most of them are the product of data theft perpetrated by hackers, they provide invaluable glimpses of the inner mechanisms of power.

About the Author

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Area Studies Online? Opportunities and Challenges When Researching “Digital Russia” during the War on Ukraine

Johanne Kalsaas (University of Bergen)

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Abstract

This article addresses the question of how do we conduct ethically sound research in the context of an increasingly violent regime? One possible solution is digital tools since the Russian part of the internet is generally open and there are fewer data protections than found elsewhere. This situation presents ethical questions that must be addressed. Most importantly, while users may communicate openly and “publicly” online, they might still expect this communication to be kept private. Studying Russia’s online space also requires addressing issues of censorship and efforts to manipulate information flows.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has left the field of Russian studies in a state of tremendous shock, prompting broad scholarly discussion about how to carve out a research agenda capable of capturing the new realities (Gel’man, 2022). One strain of this discussion relates to ethics: How do we conduct ethically sound research in the context of an increasingly violent regime, where much research data (along with the institutions and people producing it) emerges from, or contributes to, the regime’s oppressive machinery? This question is pressing not least for those of us who rely on anthropological approaches:¹ How do we study human activity when this activity might either be fundamentally distorted or put people at risk of persecution?

Another line of debate is more pragmatic and methodological in nature: How do we *practically* conduct immersive research on a Russia we are no longer able to visit? A practice so central to the production of rich, culturally situated knowledge as classical fieldwork is no longer feasible for most Western scholars. As Putin’s Russia cuts political and academic ties with the outside world, previously dominant methodological and analytical frameworks for social research are falling short.

In a context where traditional fieldwork seems inconceivable, qualitative digital methods, notably web-based ethnographies (Caliandro, 2016),² are enticing. Various initiatives with a view to creating a Chinese-style “sovereign internet” (Epifanova, 2020; Sivetc, 2021) notwithstanding, the Russian-language Internet, or RuNet, remains a comparatively open and accessible source of rich social data. This fact can be explained by two interconnected factors. First, the Russian digital sphere long slipped under the government’s radar. Lack of regulation allowed for the development of a politically and culturally vibrant new media sphere that was significantly freer than Russia’s traditional mediascape (Etlings, Roberts, & Faris, 2014; Konradova, Schmidt, & Teubener, 2009; Malinovskii, 2013). Second, Russian social network sites (SNS) have historically been characterized by far lower levels of concern with data protection and privacy than their international—notably American—counterparts (Koltsova, Porshnev, & Sinyavskaya, 2021). Thus, the scope, volume, and variety of data available to those studying the Russian segment of the Internet far exceed that which is available to Internet researchers operating in Western contexts.

The apparent ease, efficiency, and endless potential of web-based fieldwork can, however, be deeply deceptive. Through my own study of public debate on the Russian-language Internet, I have found that fieldwork in cyberspace comes with its own set of ethical, theoretical, and methodological challenges—ones no smaller or less significant than those encountered in traditional, site-based fieldwork. In my research, I combine digital ethnographic and discourse-analytical approaches (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Myles, 2020) to make sense of Russian user-driven information influence online, specifically surrounding the topic of neighboring NATO member Norway. Building on the knowledge that internet discourses are inherently dispersed and distributed (Airoidi, 2018), I explore how the story of Norway is told *through* and *by* Russian online networks, with the participation of multiple voices in multiple digital contexts. In my time working within this complex and notoriously elusive fieldsite, I have had several realizations

1 For a more in-depth discussion on the role of ethnographic methods in Russian area studies during times of war, see Morris (2022).

2 While digital ethnography has emerged as “the dominant label” for internet-based interpretive research, qualitative digital methods (QDM) encompass a broad range of qualitatively-oriented approaches to digital settings and/or data (from interviews over Telegram to visual analysis of Instagram posts). QDM can obviously also be combined with quantitative and computational methods. The present discussion nevertheless focuses on qualitative, notably digital ethnographic, approaches to Russian area studies.

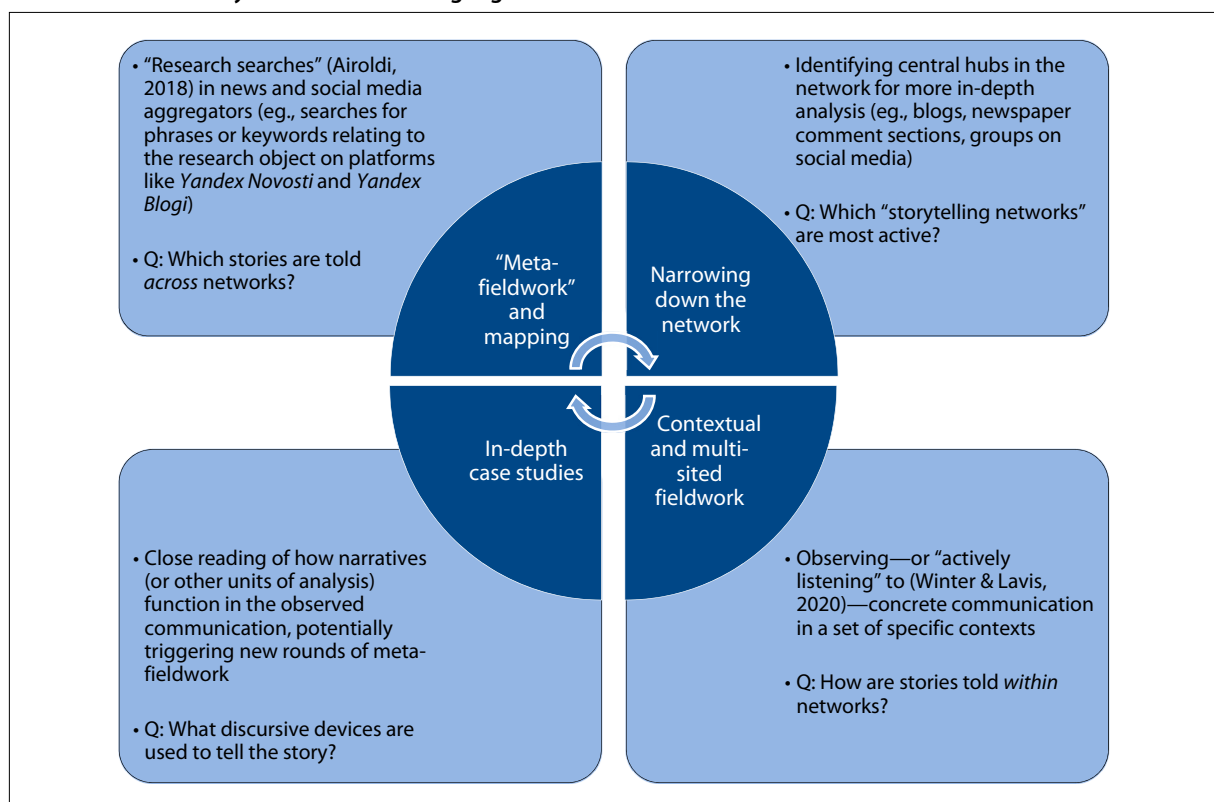
about the possibilities, challenges, and limitations of conducting (qualitatively oriented) *Russian studies online*. For the remainder of this essay, I will sketch out some of these realizations.³

Constructing the Field

Social media and the participatory web have fundamentally challenged the notion of a field site. Certainly, the idea that cultures can be studied within a strictly bounded space, as something homogenous and consistent, has proven illusory (Burrell, 2017). The quality of the Internet as “fundamentally and profoundly antispatial” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 8) goes even further in disrupting traditional approaches to fieldwork. While all research sites are, to some degree, constructed, the researcher herself an active participant in the construction of her research objects, this fact becomes infinitely more apparent in online environments. In the words of Annette Markham (2005, p. 259), “the boundaries of the field become more a matter of choice than in physically located spaces.” *Choosing* how to demarcate one’s field when studying digital culture, which is inherently nondemarcated and networked, is thus a question not only of methodological, but also of ethical considerations.

In constructing my own online research field, the insights of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) have played a crucial role. Centered around “chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations” (Marcus, 1995, p. 105), this ethnography relies on the practice of *following* people, conflicts or stories across settings, with the goal of unpacking complex, contextually contingent cultural phenomena. Building on Marcus’ initial work, internet researchers have since demonstrated the possibilities of “networked” (Burrell, 2017) and even “un-sited” (Airoidi, 2018) ethnographies. Through the data collection process, I move between mapping the “meta-fields” of dispersed communicative content aggregated by search engines and social media news feeds, and engaging with the concrete contexts where a specific conversation is taking place (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Example of the Research Process in Discourse-Centered Digital Ethnography When “Following” the Story of Norway on the Russian-Language Internet⁴



3 The scope of this essay does not permit me to discuss at length all possible implications of using qualitative digital methods—specifically digital ethnography—in the field of Russian studies. Rather than a thorough review, the essay should be read as a potential starting point for future scholarly reflection.

4 For a more detailed description of this process when researching the story of Russia’s espionage conviction of Norwegian citizen Frode Berg in 2019, see Kalsaas (2021). 9

I have found this mobile, fluid approach especially valuable when rethinking how *propagandistic communication* functions in Russia's new information environment. Frequently conceived of in terms of the Soviet-era media monolith, where influence efforts were controlled and orchestrated from above, my findings instead point toward a far more decentralized, networked, and participatory practice (see also Asmolov, 2019). This contribution to knowledge relied on moving *with* the dynamics of online communication, adapting to the affordances of the Internet (just like users themselves do) beyond the demarcated field site—not just *following the story*, in Marcus' (1995) terms, but also *following the medium* itself (Rogers, 2013). The importance of not “simply” transposing traditional approaches to digital contexts but being mindful about how *the digital itself transforms the object under study*—such as Russian information influence—cannot be overstated.

The Private/Public Conundrum

The new media landscape challenges another central concept in social research, namely “the public.” The Internet “blur[s] the lines between public and private spheres,” (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017, p. 3) to the point that some scholars argue that, in digital spaces, privacy itself is lost (Trufanova, 2021, p. 1). This concern is at the heart of internet research ethics: While users may communicate openly and “publicly” online, they might still *expect* this communication to be kept private (Franzke & Researchers, 2020, p. 7). This conundrum has been codified in ethical review guidelines across the Western world, where “expectation of publicity” is defined as a key principle for working with social media data (eg., National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH), 2019). There are, however, no directions as to *how* this concept should be operationalized, much less as to how different cultural settings might influence it.

When working in the Russian online context, the private/public conundrum is complicated by several factors. Scholars have long argued that Russia's authoritarian legacy and other cultural specifics have prevented the development of a public language—or even a public sphere (Kharkhordin, 2011; Vakhtin, 2016). While the Russian Internet (especially the flourishing blogosphere of the 2000s) could at one point have been argued to serve as an “alternative public sphere” (Etling et al., 2014), the regime's move toward informational autocracy (Guriev & Treisman, 2020)—and, more recently, unabashed repression of online expression (Freedom House, 2022)—make the situation much more bleak. Westernized, liberal-democratic understandings of the public/private divide are thus not easily applicable to Russian (or other non-Western) online settings. The global “gold standard” for internet research ethics, the guidelines by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), were authored by scholars from American, German, and Scandinavian universities (Franzke & Researchers, 2020, p. 1). Although built on a commitment to “[...] ethical pluralism and cross-cultural awareness” (Franzke & Researchers, 2020, p. 2), these guidelines thus emerge from a very specific context, one with its own set of affordances and assumptions.⁵ Internet researchers operating outside that context might feel themselves to be in something of an ethical blind spot, particularly when it comes to privacy protection: Can we truly approach online information-sharing in individualistic (eg., American) and more collectivistic (eg., Russian) social systems in the same way?

The previously mentioned disparate trajectories of American and Russian platforms when it comes to the “publicness” of social data are, I would argue, not a mere “lapse in judgement” on the part of the latter. Rather, they reflect substantial differences in (digital) culture: Russian internet users likely have significantly higher “expectations of publicity” than their American or Norwegian counterparts.⁶ The characteristics of Russian digitally mediated communication, then, might offer tremendous opportunity to internet researchers—data that, in a Western context, would be not only practically impossible but also unethical to collect might be far more easily and ethically accessed in Russian online spaces.

What Is Real and What Is Fake? Inauthenticity, Censorship, and “Information Warfare”

When doing qualitative research on Russian Internet discourse, a perpetual concern is whether—or, rather, how—the communication under study is affected by inauthentic activity and other manipulation efforts. This concern is admittedly shared by internet researchers across contexts, as content moderation, censorship, and control measures (at the hands of multiple actors) increasingly shape digital culture. This presents a fundamental ontological challenge and complicates the very notion of empirical observation: What is “real” and what is “fake” online?

5 When mentioning digital platforms where internet research takes place, for instance, the guidelines tellingly highlight Facebook, Snapchat and Google (p. 15) — none of which dominate Russian markets.

6 Not least is this due to the aforementioned legacy of RuNet as a space of political communication (see Malinovskii, 2013 for more in-depth discussion).

I would nonetheless argue that this question is especially pressing when researching the Russian online context, which has spawned what is arguably the world's leading social media manipulation industry (NATO StratCom COE, 2018). Authenticity is a definite concern when studying communication surrounding neighboring NATO member Norway: Reports have shown that Russian-language discussions about NATO in Russia's near abroad on certain social media platforms can be all but dominated by bots (Fredheim, 2017). Global social media platforms continue to struggle to identify and remove Russian industrialized influence efforts (Bay & Fredheim, 2022).

On Russia's native social networks as well, information warfare is a key concern for users, platforms, and the authorities. Especially since the invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing lawfare against "fakes about the military operation" (Jack, 2022), efforts to control online expression have gained massive momentum. Digital discourses are increasingly subject to censorship, surveillance, and blatant attacks. More than a government-coordinated crackdown, the Russian Internet is facing a form of participatory information warfare (Asmolov, 2021): The attack on free expression has taken on a viral dynamic, with a vast range of "ordinary" users fighting to protect the Kremlin's discursive dominance online.

The digitally mediated information war puts obvious constraints on the forms of research that can be conducted on Russian online discourses. But it also opens new avenues for inquiry: What does "crowdsourced" censorship truly look like? How does it affect the authorities to lose control of the propaganda apparatus? How are critical voices adapting and finding new strategies of resistance under digital authoritarianism? These are only a few of the questions the contemporary Russian online environment could allow us to explore. Rather than always attempting to filter out the omnipresent manipulation efforts in pursuit of the ever-elusive "genuine" communication, online information warfare can itself be a valid and fascinating field of research.

A Way Forward

In the wake of war, increased interest in digital spaces as an avenue for Russian area studies brings both excitement and concern to those of us already in the field. On the one hand, there is no doubt that "digital Russia," as an emerging area of research (Gritsenko, Kopotev, & Wijermars, 2021), merits more scholarly attention. We need a broad range of disciplinary perspectives, methodological approaches, and research questions in order to make sense of it. As my own research has highlighted, however, we must be very careful to avoid treating digital sources and methods as an "easy out" of the current restraints on "traditional" Russian Studies. Web-based research comes with its own complex of ethical and methodological challenges, which deserve no less consideration than those in other areas of the humanities and social sciences. As current circumstances encourage us to move forward with an expanded research agenda for Russian area studies online, this insight must be kept at the forefront.

About the Author

Johanne Kalsaas is a PhD candidate at the University of Bergen.

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Balancing Structure and Agency in Studying Russia's Future

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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

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An Online Network Solution to Fieldwork in Russia

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Abstract

Russia's war against Ukraine prevents most Western scholars from doing fieldwork in the country. In this difficult situation, digital tools can help to compensate for the inability to travel.

Conducting Research in Difficult Conditions

One of the consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is that it is no longer feasible for most Western scholars to travel to Russia to conduct field research or access empirical sources in archives or other repositories. Under conditions of full-scale war, Western scholars' inability to conduct research on the ground, combined with Russia-based scholars' loss of international contacts, means that our understanding of political, social, and economic processes in the country will suffer, as will our understanding of the historical, literary, and day-to-day context.

Although less effective than in-person fieldwork, the use of digital techniques can help restore some of the access that has been lost. Thanks to contemporary technology and the way Russia's pre-war digital sphere developed, the new barriers are permeable to online networks and cooperation platforms. In this article, I discuss a methodology and general principles for organizing remote archival research using a variety of existing networks and platforms.

In January 2022, Alexander Auzan, the dean of Moscow State University's Economics Department, published a book on the cultural codes of the Russian economy. Although he did not anticipate full-scale war in Ukraine, Auzan argued that government investments in the military-industrial complex had reduced society's trust in state institutions and pushed many people to shift to the digital sphere, where they could establish horizontal relations with collaborators. Cooperation on digital platforms provides greater security to Russians because these platforms offer more tools for avoiding state interference.

Russian willingness to engage in digital horizontal relations is the key to transcending the new Iron Curtain. Many Western-minded scholars and graduate students remain in Russia and are open to continuing cooperation in the trustworthy atmosphere of digital platforms. While extensive contacts with Russian colleagues before February 24 and the recent mass exodus of intellectuals facilitate network-building, the main problem is establishing, testing, and introducing cooperation procedures

and protocols that will make remote research assistance effective in the context of war. The initial impetus for creating remote research assistance networks was to overcome COVID-related travel restrictions. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this method remains the only window to fieldwork in Russia.

Dilemmas for Researchers

There are two significant dilemmas to be addressed before launching research cooperation with Russians. First, does it make sense to continue research activities with Russians regardless of their attitudes toward the war? There is no straightforward answer to this. On one hand, the European research agencies cut all research ties with Russia. On the other, U.S. corporations and some institutions, especially in medical studies, continue to launch new research projects in Russia and transfer money to sponsor these efforts despite the war. On purely technical topics such as medicine, the Russian state welcomes the continuation of research with Western partners and many of the restrictions come from the Western side. The Russian state, however, frequently targets social scientists for prosecution, charging them with bringing Western ideological values to Russia. Arguably, the final decision depends on evaluating one's a) research impact versus the possible consequences of cooperating with someone in Russia; b) approach to Russians as a collective or individuals; and c) opinion on whether a full blockade or targeted support for individual partners will help to accelerate the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty and facilitate change in Russia.

The issue of political risks also has to be taken into consideration. Currently, all scholars on the Justice Ministry's list have delivered prominent public anti-war messages. A recent Sistema investigation on surveillance demonstrates that the government targets public expressions and not actual cooperation with the West. Nevertheless, while individual academic cooperation has not been targeted to date, this policy could change at any moment and there is no guarantee that a daring counterintelligence lieutenant would not try to report collaborative work on 19th-century diaries as an act of espionage. Moreover, there is professional pressure being

applied inside higher education institutions that is more subtle and difficult to perceive from the outside. Individual Russian scholars are best positioned to decide how much risk they are willing to tolerate in pursuit of their research work.

Practical Advice

How can Western scholars organize remote fieldwork in collaboration with peers in Russia? In the best-case scenario, Western and Russian scholars would work together to identify research questions that are of mutual interest and promote each collaborator's research agenda. If, however, a Western scholar would simply like to access materials in Russia that are no longer accessible to them, finding a person willing to take the risk of embarking on research cooperation with Western scholars is not the most difficult problem. In this case, the success of remote fieldwork depends not on selecting a seasoned professional who can go to an archive, but on preparing a clear and detailed task order for a person who is *excited* about the opportunity to cooperate and is not afraid to dive into an externally defined topic even without proficiency in it. Almost all major Russian archives have [online catalogs](#) that would be a good source for preparing a detailed research plan. Those that do not have such catalogs make available a service for searching relevant documents. Half of one's success in remote archival research depends on the preparation of a detailed Excel sheet that explicitly states the document title, archival code, number of pages, and year, and has a clear description of research needs and keywords/last names/topics. A task order—that is, an online Excel document with hyperlinks to cloud folders for scans or pictures of each document—will be an effective guide even for an inexperienced research assistant.

About the Author

Ivan Grek, PhD, is a Deputy Director of the Russia Program at George Washington University's Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies. Trained in political science and history, Ivan specializes in studying illiberal grassroots movements and ideology in Russia.

Where can a person to fulfill the task order be found? Personal networks in Russia; professional communities on Facebook, such as [FHC Moscow](#); and existing cooperation platforms are the best places to find a good candidate. Graduate students are often less biased than seasoned professionals. Graduate students and young scholars are also frequently more transparent about their political attitudes, so a simple scroll through a potential collaborator's personal social media page can obviate the need for a conversation about their ethical positions. Finally, the new generation of researchers is open to adopting electronic solutions for project management.

Paying partners in Russia, communicating securely with them, and keeping track of assistants' time present a new set of challenges for which there are an array of online solutions. For example, a project might involve [time-tracking apps](#) that make it possible for workers to record time spent working in designated locations (i.e., archives), use secure means of [communication such as Signal](#), and [transfer money using cryptocurrencies](#). In practice, however, these steps remain complicated. Most Russians do not use cryptocurrencies and there are only a limited number of banks that permit transfers of conventional money. Most Western universities prohibit any transfers to Russia to avoid potentially violating sanction laws and other guidance issued by national governments. Accordingly, the online tools available are at best only workarounds for a difficult situation.

One of the goals of the Russia Program at GW is to connect Russian scholars and graduate students and their Western counterparts on a single platform and help them to build fruitful research relations, especially when it comes to traditional on-site investigations such as archival or library research, in order to develop scholarship without borders.

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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