

The Russian Invasion in the Context of Post-Bolotnaya Authoritarian Consolidation

Kim, Seongcheol

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Table 2: Media Sources and Political Perceptions in Russia

	Trust in the President (4 pt)			Russia's influence on the world (6 pt)			
	Beta	Std. Beta	Sig	Beta	Std. Beta	Sig	
MEDIA SOURCES							
TV news	0.405	0.196	***	0.316	0.147	***	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Internet and social media	-0.334	-0.150	***	-0.383	-0.165	***	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Daily newspapers	0.327	0.064	**	-	-	-	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
Radio	-	-	-	-0.256	-0.054	*	Main source of information: yes (1)/no (0)
CONTROLS							
Socioeconomic status	0.098	0.172	***	0.067	0.112	***	Subjective SES: 10 pt
Age	0.007	0.127	***	0.004	0.062	**	Numeric variable (18-99)
Sex (male)	-0.119	-0.057	**	-	-	-	Male (1)/Female (0)
Education	-	-	-	-0.045	-0.080	**	Education: 10 pt
Adjusted R2	0.178			0.121			

Dataset: Eurasia Barometer wave 3 in Russia (N=1205; November 2021)

ANALYSIS

The Russian Invasion in the Context of Post-Bolotnaya Authoritarian Consolidation

By Seongcheol Kim (University of Kassel / WZB Berlin Social Science Center)

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine came as a shock to many observers, including the author of this article. In terms of domestic political dynamics, the invasion is inscribed in—and has drastically intensified—the logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation, as notably seen in the performative staging of Vladimir Putin's decision to invade as a response to demands supposedly present in wider society. A key part of this is the co-optation of the Greater Russia nationalism, represented by the likes of Igor Strelkov, as a driving force behind the 2014 Russian intervention in the Donbas.

From Putin I to Bolotnaya

In addressing the key question of “how we got here,” it is worth recalling how the Kremlin's constructions of the relationship between the state, political opposition, and wider society have evolved over time. Vladimir Putin's rise to the presidency in 2000 was followed by a far-reaching process of elite consolidation and co-optation around the new ruling party United

Russia, including (and indeed most ostentatiously) in formerly restive republics such as Chechnya. In the process, institutionalized practices of “managing dissent” (Robertson 2011) were put in place, including the establishment of a consultative “Public Chamber” of largely regime-loyal civil society organizations; the creation of de facto pro-Kremlin parties within the “systemic opposition” (most notably Just Russia)

alongside existing ones (most notably LDPR); and various forms of descriptive representation for “systemic opposition” parties within state institutions, including the appointment of Yabloko co-founder Vladimir Lukin as Human Rights Ombudsman (2004–14) and Just Russia (formerly Russian Party of Life) leader Sergei Mironov’s stint as chairman of the upper house of parliament (2001–11).

As part of the Kremlin’s strategy of co-opting opposition and nurturing regime-friendly intermediary organizations, the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi was founded in 2005 as a vehicle for staging pro-government rallies and projecting the image of youth masses loyal to the regime. For example, in the context of the controversy surrounding the relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn, Nashi staged demonstrations outside the Estonian Embassy, accusing the Estonian authorities of promoting “fascism”—a notable instance of the term “fascism” being constructed to refer to perceived anti-Russian or anti-Soviet sentiment, especially in other post-Soviet republics.

The “For Fair Elections” protests following the 2011 Duma elections—which presented by far the biggest challenge to United Russia rule up to that point (Gabowitsch 2016)—marked a turning point in the Kremlin’s approach to managing dissent. The incidents on Bolotnaya Square during the May 2012 “March of Millions” against Putin’s inauguration for a third (non-consecutive) term as president became a pretext for a large-scale crackdown on opposition activists in the so-called “Bolotnaya case,” leading to a slew of prosecutions and prison sentences. In addition to this more uncompromising line against organized opposition, the Kremlin cut back on attempts to establish a pro-regime civil society, effectively disbanding Nashi (the ineffectiveness of which had been exposed in the 2011–13 protests). Instead, the period since around 2013 has been characterized by an increasingly strident national-conservative identity politics mediated via the figure of Putin as a central locus of power that directly takes up various demands present in wider society—not least among fringe far-right groups. An early instance of this was the so-called “gay propaganda law” of 2013, which was predicated on a supposed link between opposition to homosexuality and the protection of children—at a time when “Occupy Pedophilia,” an anti-LGBT vigilante group established by neo-fascists, was getting heightened attention with its attacks on gay men in the name of fighting “pedophilia.” In this vein, the post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation has entailed not only increased repression of the organized opposition, but also a pronounced social-authoritarian turn on cultural issues: the 2020 constitutional referendum, for

instance, not only enacted the resetting (*obnulenie*) of Putin’s term ledger, but also constitutionally enshrined a definition of marriage as possible only between a man and a woman.

From Bolotnaya to Donbas

In the sphere of foreign policy, the 2014 annexation of Crimea constituted the initial peak of this post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation. The ensuing pro-Putin “patriotic consensus” encompassed not only the entire spectrum of the “systemic opposition” in parliament (KPRF, Just Russia, LDPR), but also various irredentist-nationalist schools of thought within Russian society, including Eduard Limonov’s National Bolshevism, Aleksandr Dugin’s neo-Eurasianism, and Igor Strelkov’s Greater Russia monarchism. What all of these loosely organized ideological subcultures had in common (with the partial exception of Dugin) was their political marginality and distance from the state—indeed, their status as radically “non-systemic” phenomena that the Kremlin had shown relatively little interest in co-opting. Most notably, Limonov took on a leading role in late-2000s opposition protests such as the Dissenters’ Marches and Strategy-31; the title of one of Limonov’s books, “Another Russia,” was re-fashioned as a broadly anti-Putin protest slogan that figured prominently in the Dissenters’ Marches (“We need another Russia, a Russia without Putin”). With the annexation of Crimea, however, Limonov became an ardent supporter of Putin’s foreign policy.

In the context of the Russian intervention in Crimea and the Donbas, it was Igor Strelkov (né Girkin) who took on a pivotal role, leading a group of militants who seized the administration building in Sloviansk in Donetsk Oblast in April 2014. Strelkov represents a monarchist-militarist brand of Greater Russia nationalism—a strain that has always existed in post-Soviet Russian politics, with one notable early example being Alexander Lebed, a military officer who commanded Russian troops in the Transnistria War and was considered a serious challenger for the presidency in the mid-1990s. Strelkov’s Greater Russia nationalism—as expressed in numerous interviews since 2014—consists in the belief that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians constitute one nation, separated only by regional differences and artificially distinct state entities, whose unity needs to be defended and indeed restored by force. Strelkov fought in the Transnistria, Bosnia, and First and Second Chechen Wars, claiming to have left for Transnistria with his three-line rifle the day after defending his history diploma in order to “defend the Russian people.” Despite his past as an FSB officer, Strelkov claims to have no interest in institutionalized politics in Russia and to only have supported Putin in 2014 in

the hope that the latter would complete the “reunification of the Russian nation” throughout the rest of Ukraine following the annexation of Crimea. Following his departure from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic—for reasons that he has refused to disclose—Strelkov founded the “Novorossiya Movement” and later the “January 25 Committee” as an alliance of irredentist-nationalist groupings (including Limonov’s Another Russia), in both cases as oppositional movements pursuing the goal of a “reunification of the Russian people” that had supposedly been betrayed by the Minsk Agreements.

In the fateful spring of 2014, Strelkov’s intervention in Sloviansk ensured that the Kremlin’s far-reaching co-optation of domestic opposition and mobilization of nationalist sentiment would not simply end with the annexation of Crimea. The myth of the unredeemed “Russian Donbas” served as a point of convergence for restless irredentist-nationalist groupings of all stripes that had always been ready to advocate the use of military force to resolve the post-Soviet national question—namely, the fact of millions of purportedly ethnic Russians stranded beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Strelkov himself used his frequent interviews after 2014 to argue that a large-scale war with Ukraine was unavoidable in light of the armed struggle that had already begun in the Donbas to reclaim what was historically rightfully Russian. It was this morally and doctrinally charged argument that would be co-opted with a vengeance by Putin and the Kremlin in the run-up to the 2022 invasion.

Staging the Invasion

Putin’s July 2021 essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” amounted to an adoption of Greater Russia nationalist doctrine by the president himself. Notably, Putin argued in the essay that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians constitute a single nation that had been artificially divided over the centuries following the principle of “divide and rule”—culminating in the Soviet policy of “Ukrainization” in the 1920s and ultimately giving rise to modern Ukraine as a “full and complete offspring of the Soviet period.” In his speech on recognizing the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics in February 2022, Putin reiterated the claim that Ukraine was “created by Russia, more precisely by Bolshevik, communist Russia,” by the “ripping away” (*ottorzhenie*) from Russia of a part of its integral territory. In this manner, Putin reproduced an ambivalence characteristic of Greater Russia nationalism *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union as a fundamentally Russian entity (and one with agency over Ukraine), yet one that suppressed Russian nationhood in the process. In constructing the historical tearing-apart of the Russian nation as

a violent process that took place from above—over the heads of “the people,” as it were—and culminated in the “genocide” of the past eight years, Putin created a justification for Russian aggression as a form of counter-violence in reaction to, and indeed redressing, a long history of injustices against Russia.

The immediate prelude to the February 2022 invasion cast in stark relief the performative practice of Putin simply taking up demands that are supposedly rooted in wider society, including the opposition. The Duma resolution on recognizing the DNR and LNR was initiated by the KPRF; following the adoption of the resolution on February 15, Putin initially responded by remarking at a press conference that the actions of MPs are motivated by “the opinion of their voters” and that it is first necessary to exhaust the “possibilities for implementing the Minsk Agreements” (which he proceeded to declare exhausted in subsequent interventions)—as if he was being forced by public opinion to move in a more radical direction than he himself would have preferred. To borrow the words of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Putin’s claim was that “the sword has been forced into our hands”—not only by the enemy, but also by domestic public opinion. In this manner, the staging of the invasion was inscribed in the peculiar logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation: every expansion of the state’s authority (in this case, by means of drastic military aggression)—and every restriction of the scope for organized opposition as a result—is justified by an organic link between Putin and deeper social sentiment.

The repercussions of the invasion for domestic opposition in Russia have followed a largely predictable pattern: public expressions of anti-war sentiment—including media outlets covering the war as a war and as a Russian invasion—have been systematically suppressed, while the entire spectrum of “systemic opposition” parties, nationalists of all stripes, and even the Left Front as a self-styled “left-patriotic opposition” have (with a few exceptions) more or less fallen into line. Strelkov, notably, has used his communication platforms to offer his own analyses of the military situation, while supporting the invasion with an air of vindication (calling it “better late than never”). The heightened repression in recent years against Alexei Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation, as well as NGOs such as Memorial, has done its part to neutralize potential structures and outlets for mobilizing anti-war dissent. In a perverse way, the Kremlin has now achieved the greatest co-optation or elimination of organized opposition ever seen in post-Soviet Russia, even if (privately held) public sentiment against the war turns out to be higher than the 20–25% gauged in opinion polls thus far.

Conclusion

In reconstructing the Russian decision to invade Ukraine, it is necessary to understand how it is inscribed in the logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation. To be clear, this by no means makes it a justifiable, or indeed inevitable, outcome of Russian politics under Putin. It does, however, make it difficult to envision a scenario in which the Kremlin backs down from the ongoing military aggression within the logic of post-Bolotnaya authoritarian consolidation and the drastic escalation of the latter occasioned

by the invasion. Even if a peace deal with concessions from both sides is reached, the genie has been let out of the bottle—as it was in 2014—in the form of the myth of the unredeemed reunification of the “Russian nation” and, this time around, its elevation to the status of *raison d'état*. Even in the hypothetical scenario of regime change within Russia leading to a halt in military aggression against Ukraine, the genie is likely to live on as a shadow haunting would-be future administrations and as a weapon in the hands of radical nationalists.

About the Author

Seongcheol Kim is a postdoctoral researcher in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Kassel and a visiting researcher in the Center for Civil Society Research at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. His research encompasses the study of political parties, discourses, ideologies, and social movements in a comparative perspective straddling Central and Eastern, Southern, and Western Europe.

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ANALYSIS

The Fog of War and Power Dynamics in Russia's Elite: Defections and Purges, or Simply Wishful Thinking?

By Fabian Burkhardt (Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg)

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Collapse of the Putin Regime as Wishful Thinking?

“For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power,” President Joe Biden said during his speech on Saturday 27 March, 2022, in the Polish capital, Warsaw. The White House later sought to clarify that Biden's remarks referred to Putin's exercise of power in countries neighboring Russia, not to regime change. While the U.S. administration has made it clear on multiple occasions that it does not seek regime change in Rus-

sia, Biden's apparent slip of the tongue reflects widespread wishful thinking about a possible domestic effect of Russia's war on Ukraine: the eventual toppling of Putin.

In theory, this makes sense. Over the course of Russian history, major wars such as the Crimean War (1853–1856), the Russo-Japanese War (1904/05), and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) have had a major impact on Russia domestically. Moreover, comparative research indicates that starting a war