



# KNOWN UNKNOWNNS

**Studying Russia in Condition  
of Growing Non-transparency**

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All the errors remain the responsibility of the authors.

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the results of a research project, “Russia: Known Unknowns”, outlining how mechanisms of knowledge production regarding Russian affairs in social science, media, and the third sector were impacted by various repercussions of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent events.<sup>1</sup>

Today’s scholars and journalists studying Russia – its politics, society, history, and economy – face numerous methodological and institutional challenges. Access to primary data and fieldwork has become much more risky – at times, impossible – since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This is particularly problematic for researchers based in the EU, US, and countries that openly support Ukrainian efforts to maintain independence. The Russian regime continues to double down the activity of its propaganda machine: it wages numerous disinformation campaigns, polluting social media with misinformation. Distortion of the news landscape complicates any understanding of Russia’s actions, while continuing to require policy response from EU institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Since February 2022, censorship in Russia has become even more rampant and comprehensive than before, forcing independent media outlets to either close down or relocate. Furthermore, Russian authorities forcefully closed the majority of prominent NGOs that collected and published reliable data in areas such as human rights, anti-corruption, and environmental protection and clamped down on the autonomy of academic institutions. At the same time, [authorities partially restricted the publishing of statistical data](#), making administrative sources incomplete and untrustworthy. Moreover, international scientific cooperation has stalled, and many scholars who worked in the social science field in Russia went into exile.

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1 The project is based on expert interviews and analysis of open sources. This approach has some limitations; for example, it does not allow for assessing the scale of changes in epistemic regimes for each scientific field in a representative fashion. However, it permits us to sketch the most significant changes and indicate perspective areas for further research.

2 The scale of these campaigns and required policy responses were assessed in the recent report issued by the European Commission: European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, (2023). *Digital Services Act : application of the risk management framework to Russian disinformation campaigns*, Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/764631>

The Russian Federation is a heterogeneous country with a diverse, yet unequal, society and a disturbing historical legacy. Russia influences the global agenda in many directions due to its aggressive actions and policies – the unlawful invasion of Ukraine is only one example. Although the weight of the Russian economy on a global scale is relatively modest, its position as a major supplier of weapons, natural gas, oil, and other commodities (timber, diamonds, wheat, etc.), equips it with significant leverage, particularly with European and post-Soviet states. Moreover, Russia continues to evolve its domestic policies and isolate itself with shocking speed.

There is a need for accurate and multi-faceted studies of societal and economic processes happening within Russia. Without that, it would not be possible to predict even the nearest future with any degree of certainty. Nor would it be possible to produce evidence-based policies in response to the actions of Russian authorities. However, the factors mentioned above restrict the work of scholars who study Russia. Due to the scale of changes, many established approaches to data collection became unfeasible, and old interpretative models became outdated. Disruption of international cooperation in science also increases non-transparency.

The following report sketches a few emergent strategies utilized by academic scholars, data journalists, and actors within civil society to partially mitigate the repercussions of the current situation. These efforts include

- creating new digital archives and repositories of both quantitative and qualitative data about Russia,
- using alternative indicators to triangulate Russian administrative data,
- developing independent media aggregators,
- engaging in data-driven investigative journalism,
- analyzing leaked data,
- experimenting with survey techniques,
- using online methods of data collection,
- collaborating with Russia-based researchers on an individual basis,
- leveraging the potential of at-risk scholars who had to leave Russia.

These new developments show promise, but more is needed to overcome negative trends impacting studies of Russia. If the situation is not addressed adequately on an institutional level, there is a substantial risk of further fragmentation of knowledge in this field.

The report recommends

- to support initiatives aimed at collecting and archiving Russia-related data,
- to initiate projects that will systematically evaluate the trustworthiness of official Russian statistics,
- to maintain lists of reliable Russia-related data repositories, institutions, and research initiatives,
- to support projects that develop novel strategies and methods of studying Russia in the situation of its growing non-transparency and isolation,
- to foster partnerships between investigative projects and data-collecting initiatives in academia, independent media, and NGOs,
- to create flexible mechanisms to support collaborations between reputable researchers, including those who fled the country, and those who still stay there,
- to formulate ethical standards for engaging with researchers from Russia and other autocratic countries,
- to develop ethical and methodological guidelines for collecting and analyzing data from those countries.

## 2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The primary assumption of the project is that the epistemic regime of studying a country that invades a neighbor without provocation and pursues active isolationist policies while undergoing swift, continuous evolution that increasingly favors authoritarian policies would change significantly. These changes can affect scholars and institutions conducting research in various fields of social science – *sociology, economics, and political science* in the first place, but also those who work in *anthropology, history, and other disciplines*. These changes also alter the environment for other actors engaged in knowledge production, such as *media and NGOs*.

Therefore, this report aims to evaluate the impact of growing isolation and non-transparency on Russia-related research and assess how much the field is being reshaped in and beyond academia (including media and civil

society). To address this overarching question, we collected 21 in-depth semi-structured interviews with prominent experts in *economics, sociology, political science, investigative journalism, data activism*, and other areas. All the interviews were conducted online during 2023, mostly in August and September. These interviews included questions regarding access to sources and data, research strategies, institutions of academic cooperation and production of knowledge in media and other spheres, and ethics. An analysis of recent publications and open sources complemented this data.

The report is structured as follows. We start with a brief overview of the complexity of studying Russia and depicting a variety of institutions contributing to producing relevant data regarding Russian politics and society before and after 2022. We then discuss factors that distort this field and evaluate their implications and potential long-term effects. Finally, we introduce emergent research strategies and outline reliable data sources that allow valid research. Based on these, we drafted a few recommendations and guidelines for policymakers and scholars.

## List of Experts Interviewed

1. **Sergey Bondarenko**, historian, member of Scientific, Information and Enlightenment Centre ‘Memorial’;
2. **Katya Bonch-Osmolovskaya**, data journalist, ‘IStories’;
3. **Lev Gershenzon**, founder of ‘The True Story’ news aggregator, former head of ‘Yandex.News’;
4. **Arnold Khachaturov**, data journalist, head of data department at ‘Novaya Gazeta Europe’, director of ‘To Be Precise’;
5. **Félix Krawatzek**, political scientist, Ph.D. in Political Science, senior researcher at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin
6. **Alexander Libman**, political scientist, Ph.D. in Economics, professor of Russian and East European Politics at the Freie Universität Berlin, affiliated with the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development of the HSE University in Moscow;
7. **Maria Lipman**, journalist, visiting research scholar at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University; editor of the [Russia.Post](#) website;

- 8. Nikolay Petrov**, political scientist, Ph.D. in Geography, consulting fellow on the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House in London, former chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Society and Regions Program;
- 9. Konstantin Sonin**, political economist, Ph.D. in Mathematics, professor at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, former professor and vice rector at the New Economic School and HSE University in Moscow;
- 10. Kathryn Stoner**, political scientist, Ph.D. in Government, Mosbacher director and senior fellow at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, professor of Political Science and senior fellow at Hoover Institution (both by courtesy) at Stanford University;
- 11. David Szakonyi**, political scientist, Ph.D. in Political Science, associate professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University, co-director of PONARS Eurasia, and former research fellow at the HSE University in Moscow;
- 12. Maxim Trudolyubov**, journalist, Meduza 'Ideas' editor, senior fellow at the Kennan Institute, former editorial page editor of 'Vedomosti';
- 13. Andrey Tkachenko**, economist, Ph.D. in Economics, assistant professor in Economics;
- 14. Ilya Venyavkin**, historian, journalist, Ph.D. in History, co-founder of 'Russian Independent Media Archive';
- 15. Greg Yudin**, sociologist, Ph.D. in Philosophy, professor of Political Philosophy and an MA Programme head at The Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (Shaninka);
- 16. Olga Zeveleva**, sociologist, Ph.D. in Sociology, postdoctoral researcher at the Aleksanteri Institute, the University of Helsinki;
- 17. Economist** (anonymized);
- 18. Investigative journalist** (anonymized);
- 19. Political scientist** (anonymized);
- 20. Political scientist** (anonymized);
- 21. Political scientist** (anonymized).



## 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 3.1. ‘Normal Science’ and ‘Business as Usual’: Knowledge Production Regarding Russia after the Collapse of the Soviet Union

It is worth remembering that Russia is a complex and heterogeneous country dealing with the traumatic legacies of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire and a country that has undergone massive changes in the last few decades. Simple or streamlined models of explanation rarely capture developments within Russian society and economy satisfactorily. Up until recently, scholars often characterized Russia as a *competitive autocracy* or a *hybrid regime* – a state where the rule of law and elections exist on paper but where incumbent leaders can use coercive institutions, suppression of media and political competitors, as well as other illicit means to keep a grip on power.<sup>3</sup> Russian cities and regions are unevenly developed, exacerbating inequality and complicating relationships between the center and periphery.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the significance of numerous ethnical minorities and regional identities complicates these relationships even further. A ruthless clampdown on democratic freedoms – including academic autonomy and freedom of speech – started in Russia far before 2022, pushing the country further to what is defined as a proper autocracy.<sup>5</sup>

One can expect that opportunities to develop the capacity for studying such a complex country would be limited. A range of organizations for monitoring ongoing developments and trends would be required. The autonomy of these institutions would be constantly at risk. However, despite the growing tendency toward authoritarian rule, Russia was an advantageous place for doing social science for a long time.

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3 Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781353>

4 Markevich, A., & Mikhailova, T. N. (2013). *Economic Geography of Russia*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199759927.013.0004>

5 See, for instance, reports of the OVD-Info (an independent human rights defense and media group): *Reports and data*. (2013-2024). OVD-Info. <https://en.ovdinfo.org/reports>

“And then after Putin came to power and Russia became an autocracy, it was a much more open autocracy than others. So given the great interest in the study of autocracy globally, Russia was the one of the best cases for trying to understand how autocracy worked, because you had the ability to conduct surveys, you had well-trained academics based in Russia who made really important contributions to the field. [...] So we should remember that that was a very unusual period”.

– political scientist (anonymized)

The peculiar trajectory of post-Soviet transit in Russia allowed a broad range of institutions of knowledge production regarding Russian society, politics, and history to evolve relatively freely, particularly in the late 1990s and 2000s. Numerous institutional and individual actors were involved in these processes in Russia and abroad. For a long time, the country has been open to foreign scholars, who were allowed to collect data or collaborate with Russian scientists.

Therefore, a coherent, albeit imperfect, marketplace of knowledge production, which gradually developed in studies of Russia and related fields since the collapse of the Soviet Union, was characterized by two crucial features: a *high level of specialization* among involved actors and a *high level of international integration*. These attributes manifested on many levels, not only in academia. Various institutions contributed to that, as follows:

- Universities and research centers have developed significantly since the Soviet era, particularly in the 2010s, when an initiative called Project 5-100 was launched. After joining the project, the participating universities significantly increased their role in the global academic network.<sup>6</sup> Some universities established laboratories specializing in *social sciences*, oriented to global competition and collaboration with international scholars. The Higher School of Economics (HSE), the New Economic School (NES), and the European University in Saint-Petersburg (EU SPb), among others, were particularly active in this regard. That allowed international research

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6 Matveeva, N., & Ferligoj, A. (2020). Scientific collaboration in Russian universities before and after the excellence initiative Project 5-100. *Scientometrics*, 124(3), 2383–2407. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-020-03602-6>

initiatives to evolve between Russia-based and foreign scientists from American and European institutes conducting East European and Eurasian studies. Scientists were able to make complex cross-regional studies and jointly publish results in international, peer-reviewed journals;

- Russia became a subject of *longitude monitoring projects* (such as the World Values Survey) and regular assessments made by international agencies, such as the World Bank. These reports covered general economic development, as well as specific social problems, such as green transition, poverty and inequality, access to social services, and other topical issues;<sup>7</sup>
- In response to the business community's and investors' demands, informational service providers started to operate in Russia, delivering *analytics* and *market research*. Consultancy enterprises such as McKinsey & Co., Boston Consulting Group, and Bain & Co., and the 'Big Four' accounting firms opened their offices in Russia. Investment banks also established analytical and due diligence departments, contributing to the general body of knowledge regarding economic processes. The booming tertiary sector, particularly in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, created a noteworthy flow of data regarding the Russian economy as a byproduct of its primary activities;
- Access to *administrative data* improved as the government pushed for public management reforms aiming to increase the investment attractiveness of the country. Data from the [Central Bank](#), The Federal State Statistics Service ([Rosstat](#)), [The Federal Customs Service](#) and other agencies allowed scholars to study various topics, from economic development to corruption;
- After Perestroika, archives became partially open (although some documents regarding the troubling Soviet past remained classified and inaccessible). Foreign and domestic historians, as well as civil society groups such as Memorial, traced volumes of data in archives and [published numerous books and articles](#) based on these sources. These developments strikingly improved the general understanding of Soviet History;
- *Public opinion* became a topic of scrutiny and debate in both media and

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7 These research projects were quite often implemented by teams that included scientists affiliated with Russian Universities (HSE and others) and even Research Centres established by Russian Authorities directly; see, for instance: Пошарац, А., Андреева, Е., Бычков, Д., Спивак, А., Феоктистова, О., & Нагерняк, М. (2021). Организация системы защиты детей в России и в регионах: Опыт Ленинградской области и Республики Татарстан (AUS0001684). Всемирный банк. <https://doi.org/10.1596/35622>

academia. Specialized pollster companies regularly conducted surveys regarding various aspects of public sentiments and beliefs. However, some sociologists and political scientists criticized the limitations and validity of these surveys;

- Civil society developed a broad range of *monitoring and data-collecting initiatives*, contributing to the study of corruption, Soviet legacy, human rights violations, and other issues. Such organizations as Memorial, SOVA, Transparency International, OVD-Info, and others, provided valuable contributions;
- A diverse *media ecosystem*, including TV channels, business-oriented newspapers (Vedomosty, Kommersant), and various other platforms (newspapers, magazines, internet outlets) evolved in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s. Many of these publishers established analytical departments, which contributed to the understanding of events in Russia immensely. Despite regular attacks on freedom of speech and capture of significant publishers by the state actors or by loyal to the regime oligarchs (as happened to almost all TV channels and newspapers and to some internet portals), some publishers worked independently in Russia until 2022 (such as TV Rain Channel, Novaya Gazeta, and a range of internet outlets).

To borrow Karin Knorr-Cetina's trope, these diverse but somewhat complementary '*epistemic cultures*' contributed to the body of knowledge regarding Russia.<sup>8</sup> In the post-Soviet period, Russia became actively studied by historians, sociologists, political scientists, and economists based within the country and abroad. They enjoyed relatively free access to primary sources and the opportunity to communicate and criticize works of each other, thus increasing the overall quality of the '*normal science*' processes. At the same time, businesspeople created a demand for such institutions as specialized media and business analytics, putting the authorities' actions under scrutiny. Independent media and NGOs also provided valuable insights, helping researchers better understand contexts beyond their direct specializations. These actors sometimes expressed discord, friction, and even acrimony due to the incompatibility of their perspectives and research approaches, but

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8 Knorr-Cetina developed her concept applying to STEM disciplines; here, we use it to describe various approaches, perspectives and fields of study regarding one specific region/country (Knorr Cetina, K. (1999). *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Harvard University Press.)

taken together, they created a vivid, 3D picture of ongoing events and long-term trends in Russia because they complemented each other and allowed to triangulate information regarding many significant issues.

The vulnerability of this business-as-usual system of knowledge production became apparent during the last few years, particularly after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent backlash on civil and academic freedoms in Russia. The following section will discuss the key factors impeding this diverse field.

## 3.2. Studies of Russia – Factors Impacting the Status Quo

Today, the period of comfortable settings for studying Russia is gone. The complexity of research on Russia made the impact of war, internal repressions, and international isolation profound. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the rate of repressions and prosecutions inside the country accelerated. As a result of the invasion, Russia became more prominent in the global news cycle but simultaneously less transparent for observers. Russian authorities instituted harsh censorship policies, restricted the publication of administrative data, and tightened control over the educational system, academia, media, and the Internet.

“And what the period that we’re in now is the situation that most scholars in most autocracies find themselves, where it’s very difficult to get data, it’s hard to get access to top decision-makers, we have to worry a lot more about data falsification by state agencies, and it’s become much more difficult to do interviews and surveys. So rather than thinking, ‘Oh my God, the field is over’, I think the better framing is, ‘Wow, we had this great period when we could do fantastic research, and now studying Russia is like studying other autocracies”.

– political scientist (anonymized)

Surveyed experts indicated that the events unfolding after February 2022 impacted studies of Russia in closely corresponding domains such as:

- Intensification of Ideological Control and Censorship by Russian Government;
- Restrictions in Access to Primary Sources and Decreased Integrity of Administrative Data;
- Disruption of International Ties and Academic Cooperation;
- Simplifications of Narratives in International Media.

In the next paragraphs, we elaborate on why these factors were influential and their effects on the practices of knowledge production.

### 3.2.1. Ideological Control and Censorship by the Russian Government

The crackdown on human rights and the rule of law has accelerated in Russia in the last decade, particularly since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started in February 2022. Authorities exercised a few approaches to impose a new level of control. One was to target independent voices via amended restrictive laws and new forms of censorship. Enforcement of repressive legislation included increasingly harsh consequences. Subsequently, numerous journalists and academics were added to the list of ‘foreign agents’, and thousands of citizens were prosecuted for participation in protests and expressing dissent online.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the intensified propagation of propagandistic narratives on social media and by state-owned media exacerbated non-transparency by creating informational noise and spreading falsehoods.

From the viewpoint of our project, some of the most significant tools of oppression are widespread blockages of independent internet resources, which increased manifold in 2021 and 2022, and legislative changes aimed to intensify censorship. [According to OVD-Info](#), blockages of internet resources have become much more frequent since 2021, as well as an integral tool of wartime censorship. [The state blocklist](#) currently includes over 500,000 active blocks of internet resources such as websites and specific web pages.

Tighter ideological control also manifests itself in the introduction of new measures prohibiting *‘discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian*

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9 *Wartime Repressions Report*. (2023). OVD-Info. <https://oi.legal/instruction/wartime-repressions-report-april-2023>

*Federation,*’ more zealous prosecution of laws regarding ‘*foreign agents*’ and ‘*undesirable organizations*’, and codifying so-called ‘*foreign influence*’ as a reason to include an individual or an organization into the list of foreign agents.<sup>10</sup> New discriminatory prohibitions for ‘*foreign agents*’ include bans on: donating money to political parties, working in state and municipal bodies, and insuring funds in bank accounts.<sup>11</sup>

As of February 2024, the combined list of ‘undesirable organizations’ and ‘foreign agents’ includes [900 entries \(individuals and organizations\)](#). Half of these were made following the full-scale invasion, with 211 entries in 2022 and 283 entries in 2023. While individuals and organizations designated as ‘*foreign agents*’ face numerous restrictions on their activities and have to label themselves as ‘foreign agents’ in any publications, being an ‘*undesirable organization*’ means an outright ban on operating in Russia for an overseas legal body. It also poses risks for Russian citizens that cooperate with the listed organizations. International research centers, think tanks, and even Universities have become more likely to be included in the list along with their donors. For instance, [the most recent entries include](#) the Central European University, Zentrum für Osteuropa – und internationale Studien, and Hudson Institute. At the same time, state-owned media often label those listed as ‘*enemies of the people*’.

These measures affected knowledge production regarding Russia on many levels. Intensified censorship restricted expression of opinion on social media, thus diminishing freedom of speech. As historian Ilya Venyavkin mentioned:

“Censorship simply destroys platforms for people who don’t even oppose the authorities, but just don’t align with the government’s [narrative]”.

Censorship and fear, in turn, impeded instruments for measuring public opinion because people can be afraid to answer questions honestly, creating response bias. These developments triggered debate regarding applicable methods for studying this phenomenon and their limitations.<sup>12</sup>

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10 The State Duma adopted a new law on «foreign agents». What will change? (2022). Inoteka. <https://inoteka.io/ino/2022/08/22/state-duma-adopted-new-law-foreign-agents-what-will-change>

11 A New ‘Foreign Agents’ Law Comes Into Effect. (2022). Inoteka. <https://inoteka.io/ino/2022/12/07/new-foreign-agents-law-comes-effect>

12 Yudin, G. (2022). The War in Ukraine: Do Russians Support Putin? *Journal of Democracy*,



The current clampdown raises difficult choices for actors in media and the third sector. The risk of being listed as ‘foreign agents’ or ‘undesirable organizations’ and apprehension of other repressions incentivize compliance with the rules via self-censorship. Others decide to terminate activities and, in many cases, leave the country. This dramatically alters Russia’s media, civil society, and academic landscapes. In many cases, non-compliance with the ‘foreign agents’ laws is used by authorities as a justification for the forceful liquidation of prominent NGOs; their attempts to challenge it in courts were unsuccessful.<sup>13</sup> Numerous media outlets, NGOs, academics, and activists were forced into exile, creating ‘offshore’ projects in new diasporas. Autonomy was severely undermined for those who stayed and for the institutional actors, such as universities.

### 3.2.2. Access to Primary Sources and Integrity of Administrative Data

Another implication of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the following isolation of Russia is the changed level of access to data. [The Kremlin restricted access to statistical and administrative data](#), including international trade and oil and natural gas output. [Over a dozen state agencies](#) wholly or partially restricted data disclosure, including information on lawmakers’ and bureaucrats’ income, air traffic volume, migration statistics, energy consumption, government procurement, and part of information regarding the state budget. Being outside the country, now you need to use VPN with Russia as a location to access most government websites. It created intentional informational asymmetries.

Recent developments not only brought new restrictions in the accessibility of statistical data but diminished trust in the reliability of data produced by state agents, with very few exemptions. Trust in administrative data in the research community is also diminishing due to suspicions of the usage of ‘creative statistics’ by bureaucrats.<sup>14</sup>

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33(3), 31–37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0037>

13 Gavron, J. (2022). The ECtHR and the Russian Foreign Agents’ Law – a devastating case of judicial passivity. *European Human Rights Advocacy Centre (EHRAC)*. [https://ehrac.org.uk/en\\_gb/blog/the-ecthr-and-the-russian-foreign-agents-law-a-devastating-case-of-judicial-passivity/](https://ehrac.org.uk/en_gb/blog/the-ecthr-and-the-russian-foreign-agents-law-a-devastating-case-of-judicial-passivity/)

14 Goble, P. (2023). 2021 Census Worst In Russian History: Exacerbating Country’s Descent Into ‘Statistical Chaos’ – OpEd. *Eurasia Review*. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/22032023-2021-census-worst-in-russian-history-exacerbating-countrys-descent-into-statistical-chaos-oped/>



“... right now, the only source of official data I trust is the Central Bank. For all the others, either consciously or because they seem suspicious to me, I don’t trust them, so I simply don’t believe Rosstat (Russian Federal State Statistics Service) and GDP figures”.

– economist (anonymized)

The problem of reliability of administrative data is common for autocratic regimes. In ‘How Much Should We Trust the Dictator’s GDP Growth Estimates?’ by Luis R. Martínez, the research reveals a significant overstatement of economic growth in autocratic countries.<sup>15</sup> Using satellite-based nighttime light observations, the study shows that authoritarian regimes inflate their annual GDP growth figures by approximately 35%. This inflation is more pronounced in environments with stronger incentives for exaggeration or fewer constraints on manipulation. Now being a proper autocracy, we are expecting the same processes going in Russia.

New data-disclosure-related restrictions in Russia are [usually justified in the official discourse](#) by the necessity to protect the economy against sanctions. However, our respondents suspect there is a different explanation:

“The main thing is to report beautiful numbers because ‘we are the strongest, we will endure.’ The fact that the figures are inflated due to corruption is, ‘Thank God, but look at how big the GDP is.’ Partially, I think it’s also because there’s a wild brawl going on there; it’s like bulldogs fighting under a carpet. But this is the pie that the military-industrial complex and so on, everybody wants their piece and to hide the data so that some don’t point fingers at others. Look, he got more than me. How come? To make it non-transparent, what share of the pie goes to whom”.

The extent of the effects of these restrictions varies depending on the field and research techniques. It became too risky for many scholars to collect data in Russia directly. Some prominent [scholars were even personally banned from](#)

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15 Martínez, L. R. (2022). How Much Should We Trust the Dictator’s GDP Growth Estimates? *Journal of Political Economy*, 130(10), 2731–2769. <https://doi.org/10.1086/720458>

[entering Russia](#). Particularly for researchers working in the EU, US, and countries that openly support Ukrainian efforts to maintain independence, conducting fieldwork is currently next to impossible: donors do not allow the spending of grant money in Russia, and universities refuse risk-management applications due to both risks and reluctance to cooperate with Russian counterparts in academia.

Our respondents also indicated that the current state of affairs and uncertainty regarding the accessibility of the data in the future could distort incentives for some scholars, including these Russian scholars who went into exile. For example, a person with access to an exclusive data set is incentivized to postpone a day of publication to preserve the material for further articles.

### 3.2.3. Institutional Change: Disruption of International Ties and Academic Cooperation

The invasion reshaped the institutional landscape in the academic sector. In response to the war, the [EU](#), [US](#), and [G7](#) halted the bulk of research collaborations with Russian institutions (particularly state-owned universities). In the aftermath of an open letter from Russian university rectors which expressed their support of the invasion on behalf of their institutions, most international research cooperation projects were put on hold or terminated.<sup>16</sup> Russian Universities depend on state financing, so authorities also have significant control over curriculums and key assignments. During the last decade, efforts to increase the competitiveness of the top universities in Russia, have led to growing managerialism that further diminished academic freedom.<sup>17</sup>

For the scientists doing research on Russia, such repercussions tend to be much more harsh and long-lasting. Participation in anti-war protests, and the following prosecutions, threats, and dismissals forced numerous Russian scholars to emigrate.<sup>18</sup> Those who stayed are forced to comply with the

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16 Dubrovskiy, D. (2022). Russian Academia and the Ukraine War [Application/pdf]. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 281, 18–21. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ETHZ-B-000539633>

17 Dubrovsky, D., & Kaczmarek, K. (2021). Authoritarian Modernisation and Academic Freedom: The Contradictions of Internationalisation and “Pockets of Effectiveness” in Russian Higher Education. *Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化*, 16. <https://doi.org/10.4000/transtexts.1543>

18 Balakhonova, Y. (2023). *How Russia is losing scientists and destroying science*. Proekt. <https://www.proekt.media/en/guide-en/uchenye-uezzhayut-en/>

ensorship, and in many cases they have lost the instruments for cooperating with their foreign colleagues and exchanging information freely. The Russian government actively tries to co-opt leading institutions and facilitate tighter control over research agenda and curriculums, as it can be seen in the case of HSE.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, authorities tried to soften the blow for academics that stayed in Russia by [introducing a bibliometrics moratorium](#) on measuring their performance by the number of publications in international peer-reviewed journals. [The moratorium was prolonged](#) until the end of 2023, and a set of more permanent measures and regulations channelling the output of Russian scientists to internal scientific journals are currently in the making. Such measures further distort incentives for these scholars who stay in Russia by pushing them to publish solely in domestic periodicals, reinforcing the fragmentation of the international scientific sphere.

“The lack of having on-the-ground partners in Russia that we can trust and no institutional ties is a very serious problem. And that’s going to be a problem going forward because barring some political change in Russia, I think having collaborators in the country is going to be very difficult. Not just for the foreign scholars, but particularly for the local Russian scholars. So that, I think, is the biggest institutional problem, just the lack of, the sundering of these ties”.

– political scientist (anonymized)

Disruption of international cooperation in such fields as investment and consulting, augmented the gradual decoupling of the academic world. Leading consulting brands, investment banks, and international agencies left or halted all projects in Russia en masse, as did [McKinsey & Company](#) and the [World Bank](#).<sup>20</sup> Our respondents mentioned that previously, a significant part

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19 Лютова, М. (2023). Даже в советское время такого стеснялись «Медуза» рассказывает, как во время войны Высшая школа экономики из «самого либерального вуза» России превращается в «НИИ при Кремле». Meduza. <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/04/17/dazhe-v-sovetskoe-vremya-takogo-stesnyalis>

20 Partners of former Russian division of McKinsey launched ‘Yakov And Partners’ and continues to provide consulting services, but only to Russian clients. The number of employees has been reduced from 760 to 180 (as of August 2022). <https://www.forbes.ru/>

of relevant research regarding the Russian economy was produced by the analytical departments of investment banks:

“Because [if] an investment bank is [operating] there, they need to understand what is going on. Therefore, they produced industry [...] and macroeconomic research. I would say that these are the most qualified people in Russia; they worked in these banks. But now, these investment banks are leaving. I suspect those people are simply starting to deal with the [other] countries in which they are now located”.

– **Konstantin Sonin, political economist**

Overall, academia, as well as business-oriented research centers, appear to be highly vulnerable institutions as platforms for up-to-date projects in studies of Russia. In academia, projects usually require long-term planning, and their implementation also requires a relatively stable institutional environment. In the business sphere, diminishing demand for knowledge regarding the Russian economy causes a cutback in producing analytics. While new models and approaches to data analysis are required to be developed after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, having fewer people available to do so and no collaborative projects between scholars outside and inside the country significantly impacts the field.

#### 3.2.4. Simplifications of Narratives in International Media

The unpredictability of the developments in Russia, restrictions imposed by sanctions, and the inherent toxicity of the ruling regime make it difficult to continue research activities on the same level as earlier for many actors. These developments paradoxically co-exist with the growing demand for coverage of everyday actions of the Russian authorities in the Western media. Sensationalism may lead to misleading coverage of ongoing events. For instance, the situation with the so-called Wagner Group Rebellion in June 2023 demonstrated not only a lack of capacity to predict the events but also an inability to explain the goals

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[biznes/474831-partnery-byvsego-rossijskogo-podrazdelenia-mckinsey-ob-avili-o-smene-nazvania](#)

and motivation of the rebels, as well as the reaction of the ordinary people.

Sometimes, it leads to wishful thinking and even accidental dissemination of falsehoods because the current situation limits the range of available experts and propels oversimplifications. As one of our respondents stated:

“As usual, when people don’t study an object well, they tend to use very simplified schemes and analogies. They start thinking, ‘Russia is just like the Soviet Union.’ No, it’s different; things work differently there. Not better, not worse, just differently; you need to understand how”.

Armchair experts in the media often rely solely on news agenda instead of rigorous analysis of facts and details. Ultimately, it can lead to mixing propagandist and counter-propagandist statements, which itself can be considered a form of propaganda.

“I can imagine a situation in which it will be very difficult to study Russia using scientific methods. Accordingly, it will be difficult to adhere to these very strict standards that exist in the social sciences. And people who concentrate on the scientific side of the social sciences will gradually withdraw from the study of Russia. Who will be left to study Russia? People who are more likely to aspire to this kind of media or public-publicist presence will remain engaged. And these people will, to some extent, reproduce not what is happening in Russia, but some narratives that, as it seems to them, will fit into the public debate. And the less information there is, the more difficult it will be for us to understand what is happening in Russia”.

– **Alexander Libman, political scientist**

### 3.3. Hide-and-peek: Emergent Research Strategies and Institutional Adaptation

The growing rift between Russian society and the global community brings new layers of complexity to conduct research, multiplied by the rapid speed of changes in Russia, which poses new challenges for scholars who study it at a time when their instruments are limited at best. Another problem is the rigidity of traditional institutions in academia; before a cycle of applying for a grant and completing the project is done, reality can change so profoundly that chosen methods, models, and frameworks of interpretation could be updated. ‘Normal science’ in studies of Russia, in Tomas Kuhn’s understanding of the term, is hardly feasible today in most cases; continuing valid research requires building new institutions and exploring new methods.

In academia as a whole, the methods of analyzing the Global East are now being rethought; we see the desire of researchers to use a decolonial lens. In comparative studies, the colonial center of the region, i.e. Russia, is being de-centered. Nevertheless, comparative studies are becoming more in demand, and Russia often remains one of the examined cases, allowing scholars to study Russia from new angles and put knowledge regarding the country in a broader context. The detailed analysis of the recent changes in the Global East studies exceeds the limits of this report.

“I think that’s where we need to have a better reflection of our role as researchers in the discourse that we are part of – yes, we can and should use decolonial theories, and it’s important to broaden our perspective, to flip assumptions upside down. [...] But we should be very careful not to throw the baby out with the baptism water because Russia is and will remain a country of fundamental importance for developments in Europe and further afield. [...] So as more attention is devoted to studying other former Soviet republics, we need to be very cautious not to reduce the expertise we have on Russia even if access to the country has become increasingly difficult”.

– Félix Krawatzek, political scientist

The disruptive factors mentioned above impact economics, political science, sociology, history, and anthropology slightly differently because of methodological contrasts between the areas. Delineating such discrepancies in greater detail goes beyond the scope of this report and will require additional research. However, it is worth mentioning that some disciplines can mostly rely upon secondary sources and administrative data where digital archiving has become crucial nowadays. Other disciplines depend more on fieldwork and collecting primary data. There are a few approaches that can substitute, albeit with serious limitations, in-person data collection within the country. Such methods and instruments as collecting data through open sources (OSINT), using internet surveys, interviews taken via Zoom and other similar software, and exploring the application of natural language processing ('text as data' methods) will likely become a core part of the toolbox for scholars studying Russia for the years to come.

In the following paragraphs, we will explore a few trends and new research approaches currently evolving in academia and media. We will also provide examples of particular research projects that utilize promising frameworks, investigate relevant issues, and provide reliable data sources. These strategies can be divided into four categories as follows:

- digital archiving and checking the reliability of the previously accessible data;
- focusing on emergent topics and developments in these areas, where data is relatively abundant and easily collectible (propaganda studies, research on migration);
- developing new approaches for mining, triangulating openly available sources, and using proxy variables for investigating processes happening in Russia (according to our observations, such approaches are particularly important for data journalism and activism).
- developing new techniques to compensate for the limitations of established methods in such spheres as public opinion research.

### 3.3.1. Digital Archiving as an Essential Tool to Preserve Access to the Data

#### 3.3.1.1. Archiving the Administrative Data

For scholars that rely more on the trustworthiness and accessibility of the administrative data and statistics, the main strategy is archiving the previously accessible datasets from Russia and validating their reliability. Initiatives such as [To Be Precise](#), [Research Data Infrastructure \(INID\)](#) platform and [Discuss Data](#) focus on data gathering and developing innovative techniques to build datasets based on administrative data sources. They also pay special attention to alternative indicators and to the regional dimension of the data to show that the picture in Russian regions is more complex and diverse than many people tend to think. They collected and saved previously publicly accessible data we mentioned before, which was classified after the war in Ukraine, e.g., historical data on prison populations, air pollution, etc. To do so, they use the [‘Wayback Machine’ web-archive service](#) and dig into the API of deleted web pages where some data could be still discovered. To check the reliability of the datasets, they analyze the source of the data ranging the ministries by credibility and create discussion within the expert community. Some examples of datasets they provide are:

#### [Discuss Data datasets](#)

This repository features datasets on civil society, corruption, elections and referendums, journalistic and social media dynamics, migration and displacement, political parties and politicians, and protests in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Together these areas contribute to a comprehensive understanding of societal and political phenomena, exploring issues related to governance, civic engagement, media influence, migration patterns, and political activism.

#### [Research Data Infrastructure \(INID\) datasets](#)

The datasets cover a comprehensive range of topics related to Russia’s environmental, economic, and demographic landscape, including, for example, details on environmental expenditures by major companies,



regional investments in environmental protection, municipal-level data on atmospheric pollution, combined demographic panel data from 1990 to 2019, a database of management models for municipal entities, and statistical insights into the demographic situation across Russian regions.

### **To Be Precise datasets** [↗](#)

These datasets gather regional-level statistics for a varied number of topics: data from statistical compendiums of the Federal Statistical Agency and other federal ministries from 2000 to 2023. The data covers various aspects including socio-demographic factors (such as fertility, mortality, and migration), the composition of local economies and industrial output, investment trends, the state of education and healthcare, municipal finances, average income and unemployment rates, local procurement activities, consolidated corporate financial reports, construction in the housing sector, agricultural outputs, and housing infrastructure. Additionally, the data about social problems in Russia – from HIV, oncology, and poverty to crime, the penitentiary system, alcohol and drug addiction – is also provided.

Another possible strategy to access the administrative data is to triangulate sources with the figures generated in other countries and other available data sets. As political scientist Kathryn Stoner said:

“If you want to see the volume of Russian oil exports to India, [...] you look at what India says it’s importing because the Indian numbers are more likely to be reliable than the Russian numbers. And so that’s how sometimes we can tell what is true. And what is probably not”.

Such approaches allow scholars to make adjustments in the case when data is incomplete or inflated.

### 3.3.1.2. Archiving the Media

As historian Ilya Venyavkin said in the interview:

“The Russian state is completely frozen and criminalized; in the future, I strongly suspect that the Russian Federation will systematically destroy some archives.”

It is based on this understanding that a number of initiatives have emerged that are aimed at archiving Russia-related textual data and media materials.

Such projects as **‘RIMA’ (Russian Independent Media Archive)** and **‘True Story’** (news aggregator) demonstrate that collaborations between media and civil society can help to create significant informational resources. The authors of these projects are inspired by a fight against disinformation and the goal of preserving historic legacy. Their projects seek to create media archives while it is still possible to parse all the required information. These archives are becoming increasingly helpful for analyzing the processes that develop in Russia.

#### **[RIMA](#)**

RIMA is an acronym for the Russian Independent Media Archive, dedicated to safeguarding the contributions of independent Russian journalists spanning over two decades.

#### **[The True Story](#)**

The True Story is an independent news aggregator launched in 2022. Currently, one of the priority methods of news content distribution is news aggregators, such as The True Story project. The True Story sets an important task and goal – to provide a multifaceted view of each event, allowing various voices and sources to express themselves.

### 3.3.1.3. Archiving and Digitizing the Collections of Historical Documents

Historians claim the situation with access to the physical archives in Russia has not changed significantly since the Russia-Ukraine war started. Foreign scholars are often not allowed to access the archives inside the country; however, researchers based in Russia can still do so and continue to digitalize and publish documents regarding many significant historical topics. Such initiatives as digital archives became crucial when a wave of liquidations of NGOs in Russia endangered the preservation of their archival collections, consisting of valuable documents regarding the Soviet legacy and history of civil society in post-Soviet Russia. Below we provide links to a few digital archives on public history that are already accessible:

#### **[Prozhito](#)**

Prozhito Corpus is an electronic library of diary entries that enables users to work not only with individual diaries but also with the entire corpus of texts from the era. Users can access selections based on dates, gender, age, the location of diary keeping, and more. Since 2019, the corpus has also been supplemented with memoir texts.

#### **[Victims of Political Terror in the Soviet Union](#)**

Database which comprises more than 3,100,000 short biographies of victims of political repressions in the USSR. Created by the Memorial Society based on regional lists of victims.

#### **[Open List](#)**

Another database which comprises more than 3,200,000 short biographies of victims of political repressions in the USSR. Initially based on data from Memorial's dataset, but built on the wiki-principle, which allows users to add data from family archives.

### 3.3.2. Collecting Data Regarding Propaganda, Human Rights Violations, and New Trends in Migration

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 marked a pivotal moment in the academic examination of Russian propaganda. This conflict not only intensified scholarly interest in comprehending the mechanisms and effects of propaganda dissemination but also raised questions regarding the evolving landscape of information control and transparency. In a world where misinformation and disinformation can be concealed within propaganda on the internet and in media, researchers have been increasingly driven to analyze this complex phenomenon. Researchers investigate how propaganda influences public perceptions and how data regarding statistics or public opinion is being used for propagandist efforts.<sup>21</sup>

Large dataset on Russian propaganda, including *Z-channels in Telegram* and *all materials published by the Russian government news agency RIA Novosti* since 2003 could be other sources used. Scholars also access various *alternative sources on topics related to the war in Ukraine and internal trends in Russia* (eg. list of ‘patriotic events’ in 10 000 Russian schools, number of aircraft accidents, FSB ‘anti-terrorism’ activities, Russian-controlled companies in the occupied territories). Besides that, NGOs remain reliable sources of information regarding human rights violations, for instance, freedom of assembly (OVD-Info) and political prosecutions in Russia (Memorial<sup>22</sup>). Further, we mention other data sources that could be used for propaganda studies:

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21 Yudin, G. (2022). The War in Ukraine: Do Russians Support Putin? *Journal of Democracy*, 33(3), 31–37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0037>

22 *Political Prisoners and Political Repression in Russia in 2022*. (2023). Political Prisoners. Memorial. <https://memopzk.org/analytics/we-publish-a-report-on-political-prisoners-and-political-repression-in-russia-in-2022/>

### **OVD-Info**

OVD-Info is an independent human rights and media group dedicated to defending the rights of assembly and expression. Its mission goes beyond this, as we operate both within Russia and internationally to combat political persecution. OVD-Info gathers data, creates content about political repression, provides legal assistance to those unjustly persecuted, and strives for systemic changes in the field of human rights.

### **PEP. The Database of Public Officials in Russia**

The Database of Public Officials in Russia (PEP, Politically Exposed Person) is a database created for use by financial monitoring entities (banks, payment organizations, stock exchanges, etc.) to identify PEPs in Russia and related individuals, as well as to assess the level of risk associated with serving such clients.

### **The President's words by Dekoder**

Dekoder created the dataset including more than 10,000 Kremlin publications. It helps to determine what the Russian presidents talked about over the last 20 years and how the presidential discourse changed over the years.

One arising field partially helping to understand Russian society is examining the diaspora. Although this approach does not provide comprehensive insights into the entire Russian population, it allows for the maintenance of a social scientific perspective within the well-established realm of knowledge production on Russia, thus enriching academic discussion. Research projects regarding this topic emerged immediately after the invasion broke out.<sup>23</sup>

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23 See, for instance: Камалов, Э., Сергеева, И., Костенко, В., & Завадская, М. (2022). Большой исход: Портрет новых мигрантов из России. Отчет по результатам опроса в марте 2022 проекта OutRush. [https://outrush.io/report\\_march\\_2022](https://outrush.io/report_march_2022)

The precise number of individuals leaving the Russian Federation since February 2022 remains uncertain but presents an intriguing area for investigation, despite the increasing challenges tied to studying this group.<sup>24</sup> The specific context of countries where Russians have sought refuge following the onset of the Russian full-scale invasion profoundly influences the experiences of these recent expatriates. The role of the country's context and the interactions between it and the individual behavior and attitudes, questions of solidarity and belonging of emigrants are studied now. As an example, we will briefly cover the results of an article Russians in the South Caucasus: Political Attitudes and the War in Ukraine by Félix Krawatzek, George Soroka, and Isabelle DeSisto.<sup>25</sup> The Armenian setting, known for its more relaxed atmosphere, promotes self-organization and mobilization, attracting highly active Russians. Conversely, the Georgian context, as indicated by available data, appears more complex and restrictive. This viewpoint portrays Russians in Georgia as approaching surveys with greater caution and hesitance, and exhibiting significantly reduced involvement in protests while residing abroad. Other research focuses on the transformations of emigrants' social ties. In the current climate, national identity (being Russian) is not functioning as a unifying idea. Instead, professional identities and the idea of a shared destiny are the most common points of convergence.<sup>26</sup>

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24 Recent approximations suggest an estimate in the range from 820,000 to 920,000 people, with Kazakhstan, Serbia, and Armenia at the top of the list. See the review: *Escape from War: New data puts the number of Russians who have left at more than 800,000 people*. (2023). Re: Russia. <https://re-russia.net/en/review/347/>

25 Krawatzek, F., DeSisto, I., & Soroka, G. (2023). Russians in the South Caucasus: Political Attitudes and the War in Ukraine. *ZOiS Report, 2/2023*. [https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS\\_Reports/2023/ZOiS\\_Report\\_2\\_2023.pdf](https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2023/ZOiS_Report_2_2023.pdf)

26 Social Foresight Group. (2023). *Entrepreneurship Attitudes of New Russian Diasporas* (Ideas for Russia). Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom. <https://nemtsovfund.org/en/entrepreneurship-attitudes-of-new-russian-diasporas/>

### 3.3.3. New Approaches to Data Collection and Interpretation in Media

After the invasion broke out, numerous media outlets, were banned and blocked in Russia. Many Russian-speaking media platforms relocated to third countries and continued working in an ‘offshore’ regime.<sup>27</sup> That allowed them to avoid censorship and continue their investigations. Some of these media organizations ([‘Meduza’](#), [‘Proekt’](#), [‘Verstka’](#), [‘IStories’](#), and others) even before the invasion established dedicated data processing departments, which currently prioritize inquiries regarding such topics as the scale of permanent losses in the war, Russia’s paths of avoiding sanctions, and other investigative topics.

Amidst a lack of comprehensive information, journalists and researchers are joining forces to work more effectively with the available data. It gradually became a widespread research practice to complement the analysis of official government data by using proxy variables and triangulating hypotheses by studying several data sets in one research project. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, proxy variables, like excess mortality and Yandex Wordstat, became crucial in estimating the actual death toll and scale of the epidemic at a time when official data faced substantial challenges. Additionally, data activists and other researchers incorporate data leaks. The combined use of proxy variables and data leaks enables the discovery of unexpected connections between diverse phenomena and uncovering cases of corruption and other hidden processes. According to surveyed journalists, individual data leaks themselves usually do not have a high value. The value of information increases when sources, including leaked ones, are combined, forming overlapping data sets that allow for deeper analysis and the reconstruction of cross-connections. Open-source intelligence (OSINT) is a research method based on searching and analyzing publicly available information to gain new knowledge. OSINT specialists focus on data that has been disclosed by sources and is in the public domain. Data journalists analyze extensive datasets to create or enhance news stories, applying data visualization and statistical analysis techniques.

There are different opinions in the scientific community regarding the use of

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27 Balakhonova, Y. (2022). *Novy Mir: A Guide to Russian Media in the Times of Total Censorship*. Proekt. <https://www.proekt.media/en/guide-en/russian-media-after-war-en/>

*leaked data*. In some cases, such as with WikiLeaks data, some academic journals refuse to publish articles, possibly due to potential legal actions, especially from the United States, while the likelihood of legal actions from Russia is lower. Some scientists believe that the use of such data is acceptable if it does not harm any party. In their view, if the information is of no harm, its use is justified from an ethical standpoint, even if it was obtained unlawfully. However, debates arise about how to determine exactly who may be harmed. These issues present ethical challenges to science and prompt serious discussions. To handle leaked data sets ethically, most media outlets refrain from acquiring databases from illicit sources and ensure the protection of personal information. They also, if possible, prefer information that has already been disclosed and is available in the public domain. One of the examples of an academic article well-published in an international journal in 2013 using leaked data from the Central Bank of Russia is the paper by Maxim Mironov and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya.<sup>28</sup> In the article they present evidence of corruption within the allocation of public procurement in Russia and evaluate its effectiveness. Their findings indicate that companies with procurement revenue engage in increased tunneling activities around regional elections.

There are many recent joint investigations by Russian independent journalists, data activists and scholars that demonstrate the power of open data analysis. [‘Mediazona’, in collaboration with ‘Meduza’ and researcher Dmitry Kobak](#), has devised a method to estimate Russian military casualties during the Ukraine invasion using publicly available data. Russia maintains a publicly accessible probate registry primarily used for asset inheritance like apartments, cars, or land, but it doesn’t cover all deceased individuals due to varying assets. In 2022 and 2023, there was a notable increase in probate cases, particularly among younger men. By analyzing these cases based on age brackets, ‘Mediazona’ and ‘Meduza’ estimated excess male mortality, revealing the actual casualties in the war. Another indirect indicator that helps evaluate the actual scale of losses, while not providing direct statistical information about the number of casualties of war participants, is [the number of pension recipients for the loss of a breadwinner, disabled veterans, and war veterans](#).

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28 Mironov, M., & Zhuravskaya, E. (2016). Corruption in Procurement and the Political Cycle in Tunneling: Evidence from Financial Transactions Data. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 8(2), 287–321. <https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20140188>



The data provided by regional ministries has [enabled journalists from 'IStories'](#) to estimate the scale of financial commitments of various regions toward so-called 'special military operation'. [Publications in the 'Verstka'](#) clarify the mechanisms by which third-party nations facilitate so-called '*parallel imports*'. Other recent publications in 'Novaya Gazeta. Europe' included an investigation regarding a [practice of procurement of equipment from the European Union for oil and gas extraction](#) and an [inquiry about Roskomnadzor](#) – an agency which implements internet censorship in Russia.

Although media and NGOs became a target for censorship and prosecution in Russia, many of them managed to reshape and relocate their operation and contribute to the production of knowledge regarding processes happening in the country. There is a potential for productive collaboration between media, NGOs and academic institutions in this field.

### 3.3.4. Discussion regarding Validity of Public Opinion Surveys

The situation is more challenging for scholars that rely more on primary sources and field observations. Researchers abroad are restricted in their fieldwork access, and even those who stay in Russia face difficulties in acquiring data due to possible higher risks for respondents.

Repressive or authoritarian environments create a climate where conformity to the dominant narrative becomes a survival strategy. In such settings, individuals may suppress their true beliefs and instead express views that align with the prevailing propaganda to avoid potential repercussions. It incentivizes the respondents to refrain from participating in surveys altogether or to repeat ready-made narratives to be safe. This situation sparked intensive debates regarding the validity of public opinion surveys as researchers grapple with the formidable task of eliciting honest and accurate responses from individuals living in environments where dissent is discouraged.<sup>29</sup> To quote an economist Andrey Tkachenko:

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29 Rosenfeld, B. (2023). Survey research in Russia: In the shadow of war. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39(1-2), 38-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2151767>

“If you just ask them ‘Do you support the war or not?’, it is quite risky for people to say, ‘I do not support this’ because they might feel that it is dangerous and they will be jailed”.

However, research shows that the number of refusals to participate in surveys nowadays did not increase in comparison with the surveys conducted in 2021, but the question of cautious wording became essential.<sup>30</sup> In these circumstances, researchers experiment with their questionnaires by adding indirect questions. That can provide insights into public sentiment without explicitly soliciting sensitive views. It also allows to divide people into groups in terms of war support rather than being obliged to choose between two sides.<sup>31</sup> Alternative ‘public opinion’ data from social media (VK, Telegram) is also highly used by scholars to access Russian society. Recent qualitative studies suggest that a substantial part of society remains apolitical and inert, albeit ready to demonstrate ‘passive support’ for the regime.<sup>32</sup>

Studying low-profile issues enables scholars to sidestep suspicions of disloyalty while still obtaining information about society within the country. Stepping back from questions about war support, not because they lack interest in studying them, but mainly as a means to uncover true preferences while ensuring the safety of respondents.

“I think those kinds of behavioral indicators or the justifications for why people support or don’t support a particular policy, can often tell us more because people are more open to talking about it. So if we look at, for example, birth rates or real estate transactions, they might tell us more about the mood of the country than the standard robotic questions ‘Do you think things are going in the right direction or not?’

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30 Zvonovsky, V. (2022). #6. Respondents’ cooperation in surveys on military operations. ExtremeScan. <https://www.extremescan.eu/post/6-respondents-cooperation-in-surveys-on-military-operations>

31 See, for instance: Chapter 7. (2022). Chronicles. <https://www.chronicles.report/en/chapter7>

32 See, for instance: Kappinen, S., & Zhuravlev, O. (2023). *From Condemnation to Inevitability. How Passive Support for the War Emerged in Russia*. Russia.Post. <https://russiapost.info/society/passive>

Because people have a real stake in those kinds of decisions. Are they willing to buy an apartment? Are they willing to have a child? Are they willing to open a new business? Are they willing to travel to Crimea for vacation? Those are very consequential decisions that we can track that are more important than just a survey, just a survey question”.

– political scientist (anonymized)

Further, we cover several survey initiatives that evolved after the 24th of February to monitor the attitudes of Russians to the war in Ukraine. They experiment with their questionnaires by adding indirect questions, allowing them to the certain extent to reveal public preferences. At the same time, public opinion surveys with a long history of research in Russia ([FOM](#), [WSIOM](#), Levada-Center) are being criticized but still accessible for less sensitive topics:

### **Chronicles** [↗](#)

The research project Chronicles has been initiated by Russian oppositional politician Aleksei Minailo and other social scientists and analysts. Its aim is to speak up on how the war with Ukraine is being perceived in Russia. To ensure the transparency of the research, anonymized data sets, questionnaires, and analytic reports on every chapter are published on GitHub.

### **Levada-Center** [↗](#)

Levada Analytical Center (Levada-Center) is a Russian non-governmental research organization. The center conducts regular monitoring of Russian public opinion. Experts have a lot of concerns while interpreting and wildly generalizing the results that Levada-Center provides. But their main advantage is the panel structure of the dataset with 20 years of dynamics.

## **Russia Watcher** [↗](#)

The Russia Watcher is a survey initiative aimed at gathering frequent public opinion data from Russia. It was established in response to the conflict in Ukraine to gain insights into the evolving public sentiments surrounding the war and to understand why Russians were maintaining their support for it. Its frequent data collection enables us to track how Russians respond to unfolding events on the ground.

## **Russian Field** [↗](#)

The project Russian Field became popular due to ongoing monitoring of the attitude of Russians toward 'Special military operation' in Ukraine as well as their attitude toward politics. They were able to divide Russians into groups by the support and anti-support levels, showing its dynamics with the poll results updated every two months.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is notoriously hard to predict the trajectory of societal change in Russia. Under international pressure and sanctions, the incumbent political regime demonstrates remarkable resilience and determination. The factors mentioned above diminish the capacity of the research community to scrutinize the country from short- and long-term perspectives. Disruption of ongoing research collaborations, the growing complexity of the situation, and a veil of news create a condition when academia and other actors are often too slow to adjust. There is a risk that the field will not attract talented people, resulting in a more systemic loss of capacity. As political scientist Kathryn Stoner said,

“...so, it is a crisis. I’ve talked to several colleagues about this and how they’re getting around it at other universities. Some are simply moving off the study of Russia. [...] Others are kind of changing or advising that people change projects or the nature of projects so that they start studying migration or doing things like studying the Russian media or scraping Twitter for data. This is a very popular thing to do because you can do it”.

Scholars can also be forced to switch to research strategies with significant limitations. It is important to be aware of the stated problems and anticipate a long-term negative impact of them.

The situation requires comprehensive and creative mitigating measures from the international community. We suggest that it is vital to support scholars at risk, to recreate and reconstruct research collaborations, and to support data-collecting and data-sharing initiatives with the participation of NGOs and media outlets. It is also important to facilitate channels for discussion of methodological, institutional, and ethical challenges faced by scholars conducting research on Russia. Support for such issues as investigating human rights violations and documenting misinformation campaigns can be prioritized. However, a wide variety of topical research should also be supported to avoid oversimplification and loss of capacity for understanding more subtle processes happening in Russian society. More specifically, the list of measures to consider

can include:

- supporting data-collecting initiatives run by universities, research centers, media enterprises, and NGOs;
- initiating projects that will systematically evaluate the trustworthiness of official Russian statistics;
- maintaining lists of trustful data repositories, research institutions, and initiatives;
- establishing new long-term monitoring projects and open data repositories, for instance, a repository tracing the footprints of Russian misinformation campaigns;
- supporting the exchange of data between social scientists, media, NGOs, and other actors,
- formulating ethical standards for engaging with researchers from Russia (and other autocratic countries) to determine the reasonable scope and rigor of restrictions on the usage of data of Russian origin and develop ethical norms of collaborations with Russian scholars on an individual basis;
- creating adaptive and flexible mechanisms to support independent research groups studying Russia and foster collaborations with reputable Russian scientists, including at-risk scholars who fled the country and those who still stay there;
- conducting foresight workshops and conferences held in third countries that became centers of emigration from Russia, like Armenia, Kazakhstan, Türkiye;
- supporting initiatives that develop novel strategies and methods of studying Russia in the situation of its growing non-transparency and isolation;
- supporting projects that develop comparative approach to studying Russia as well as other frameworks that are better fit for the current context.

In implementing these measures, it is important to remember how profoundly the research community was impacted. Emerging initiatives, such as independent research groups, can hardly compete on equal ground with more established institutions; therefore, supporting them may require more flexible approaches than usual. Without a program of such measures, there is a risk of further fragmentation of research on Russia. Ultimately, that can diminish opportunities for formulating evidence-based policies regarding the actions of the Russian regime.