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Misreading Russia or Misreading Putin?

Commentary on Leigh Sarty's Article

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Leigh Sarty's thesis that the West and Western scholars have repeatedly misread Russia might seem to be supported by the fact that 'Russia experts' did not foresee and, in fact, were most commonly surprised by Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. We did not correctly read the warning signals of Russia's 2008 actions in Georgia and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. The fact that we did not anticipate Russia's 2022 actions suggests, however, that we misread Putin, not Russia. And perhaps also that we 'read' Ukraine better than Putin did, expecting that Ukrainians, based on their history, would not bow down in defeat and, therefore, Russia would not launch a doomed attack. If we misread Putin, it was probably because we overestimated his rationality and savvy. We did not expect him to embark on what would turn out to be a counterproductive action that would create a self-fulfilling prophecy—namely, the further expansion of NATO on Russia's northern flank and a reinforced determination on the part of Ukrainians to 'join the West,' meaning both NATO and the European Union (EU), all of this potentially reducing Russia's perception of its own security.

If we misread Putin, whether we 'misread Russia' is another question. Equating Putin's action with Russia is a perilous road to follow because Russia's political and social reality, beneath the apparently controlled surface, is as multifaceted and varied as its geography. Just read Larry Black's (2024) piece in this issue on the variety of viewpoints and methods being used to oppose Putin, even under highly repressive conditions.

Because social scientists generally did not predict or foresee Russia's actions in 2022 also does not mean that those actions were predetermined or that they defy a nuanced explanation that takes into account a range of factors. There is already a large literature trying to explain Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and many of these explanations are quite plausible without appealing to historical determinism. Many analysts consider contingent factors or point to previous critical junctures when a particular path was taken rather than other possible ones. Contingent factors include those relating to Putin's state of mind at the time he made the decision, as Sarty acknowledges. This was influenced by his relative isolation during the pandemic, unreliable information received from his closed circle of advisers, and his mistaken assessment of Western (and Ukrainian) weakness and division. In terms of Putin's faulty assessment of the West, even such contingent factors as the timing of Merkel's withdrawal from the German leadership position may have played a role, along with Russia's misunderstanding of the basis of the transatlantic relationship. Other explanations draw on the particularities of the relationship that developed between Ukraine and Russia in recent decades (Gomza 2022), marked by a cycle of events and critical junctions that led to one of several

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possible outcomes. Here, the recent book by Popova and Shevel (2024) is particularly insightful, where the authors explicitly consider counterfactuals that could have led to different outcomes. Finally, another set of explanations draws on the domestic political situation in Russia itself (McFaul 2020). In this instance, one could point to the tightening grip of Putin's control in Russia, the success with which the regime used the Crimean annexation to bolster regime legitimacy, and the failure of the regime to embrace a process of economic reform that could assure prosperity in peace. This combination created a domestic situation where a further appeal to Russian nationalism and Russia's right to hegemonic control in its neighbourhood might have seemed like an attractive option to Putin for securing the elite's continuing dominance. This latter explanation suggests that what is at stake is not Russia's security but the security of the elite's power.

In view of the variety of possible explanations, Sarty's self-acknowledged determinism is somewhat puzzling because he at once critiques the "politics of inevitability" (Sarty 2024, 129) that he sees in the deluded optimism about Russia underlying the 'post-Cold War consensus' in the West while himself endorsing a more pessimistic determinism. While I agree that the optimism in the West that prevailed in the late 1980s and early 1990s was exaggerated, it is equally misguided to conclude that the descent of Russia into authoritarianism and expansionism under Vladimir Putin was inevitable. In arguing that Western actions and assumptions "underappreciated our own role in influencing the perceptions and choice of the leadership in the Kremlin" (Sarty 2024, 125). Sarty himself implies that the outcome was not pre-determined had we, in the West, but exerted a different type of influence. Furthermore, what is the point of 'reading Russia' more correctly if everything is already determined?

As a social scientist, I balk at the idea that outcomes are predetermined as much as I resist the notion that they can be reliably predicted. Social scientists try to explain outcomes without claiming to be able to predict the future. The reason for this is simple: social science explanations are probabilistic, not deterministic. We most often conclude, based on our attempt to apply a 'scientific' method to the study of society and politics, that some kinds of outcomes are more likely than others, but we can never find the certainty of outcomes that is expected by the natural sciences. Our inability to reliably predict outcomes is, in part, because what occurs is the result of the interaction of so many diverse factors; we could never know them all, take them all into account, or devise a 'controlled experiment' to test them. But our inability to reliably predict is also, and probably most importantly, because human will and human choice are important determinants of outcomes, even if, for any given individual, that choice is constrained by upbringing, genetics, the environment, and chance happenings. People make choices in complex situations, and these choices influence the choices and decisions of those who come after them. During critical historical junctures, those choices can have a pivotal influence on later circumstances, but even then, further decision points arise where various paths are possible.

One can point to the importance of the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan as key critical junctures for Ukraine, where the future trajectory was shaped by the choices of both thousands of individual protesters but also by a small group of leaders that responded to them. Turning to Russia, the peaceful collapse of Soviet power, which represented a critical juncture, was a result of Gorbachev's decisions, which could have gone otherwise or have been different had another leader risen to power. That the peaceful collapse of the USSR was something unanticipated by many experts would suggest that Russia is not on an inevitable path to dictatorship and aggression. The

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subsequent authoritarian turn under Putin's leadership was also not predetermined or inevitable. Factors that affected it are multiple, including the failure of an effective opposition force in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Gel'man 2005) to project itself as a viable alternative, Yeltsin's own personal weaknesses, which Sarty correctly identifies as contributing to his political downfall, and Yeltsin's choice of Putin as interim prime minister, which was hardly inevitable. The fact that Gorbachev's reform direction was reversed under Putin does not mean it was inevitable. Sarty is correct, however, to point out that a belief in its inevitable success was also incorrect. The failure was instead the product of underlying dynamics, contingent factors, and the choices of individual leaders, as well as citizens. One could add to this policies adopted by Western actors, although it is contested whether the West 'provoked' Russia through policies such as NATO expansion (Mearsheimer 2022) or was inadequately responsive to Russia's concerns.

Sarty suggests that Russia is so unique that general theories or concepts that Western scholars use to explain political outcomes elsewhere are of little use for understanding Russia, and in trying to apply them, we end up "misreading Russia." He argues that "the explicit assumption was that Russia's 'flaws' did not render it unique, that it was on the track to develop like any other 'middle-income capitalist democracies' in accordance with the postulates of social science theory" (Sarty 2024, 130). No doubt Russia is unique, as is every country, and Sarty is correct that prescriptions for success cannot be copied from one society to another. However, this does not mean that analyzing Russia in a comparative context is useless or that Russia is exempt from insights generated by the study of comparative politics. A major turn in political science studies of Russia following the collapse of the USSR was precisely an effort to bring the study of Russia into the field of comparative politics (Chandler 1994), challenging the notion that Russia is so distinctive that it is exempt from factors that might be influential in other contexts. We should remind ourselves that this effort to 'bring Russia in' to the realm of political science analysis was viewed as particularly promising because we could, through the comparison of several post-communist countries, try to develop general insights about determinants of political outcomes of reform in countries that shared many commonalities in terms at least of recent historical experience (Hanley 2011). Several of these states, like Russia, have seen efforts at liberal reform either stillborn or reversed. In this, Russia is not unique. True, no other post-communist state has executed an attack of this scope on a neighbouring country (but bringing China into the universe of cases raises the possibility that that may happen). Therefore, expanding the comparative sweep, Russia is also not unique among nations in this characteristic either.

The effort 'to bring Russia in' to the study of comparative politics has not been in vain and has, in fact, produced very important insights. The types of questions that these studies have sought to answer include the following: why did some post-communist or post-authoritarian countries develop consolidated democracies while others did not? What impact did various economic reform strategies (e.g., shock therapy versus gradualism) have both on economic outcomes but also on political trajectories? What types of institutional features (e.g., electoral systems, parliamentary versus presidential systems) were more conducive to successful liberalization? What role have identity factors played in influencing the likelihood of liberalizing reforms or a reversion to authoritarianism? These are just a few examples of the types of questions that social scientists have explored using the universe of post-communist systems and sometimes the broader database of post-authoritarian systems. This work has, in fact, yielded important results and helps us to better understand the trajectory of Russia's development. Fruitful examples of this type of work include

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the insights of Henry Hale explaining why colour revolutions occurred in some post-communist countries and not others, and Lucan Way (2015), who explains why authoritarian governments sometimes fail. Some of the very factors that Sarty himself mentions are mobilized in these explanatory frameworks to elucidate outcomes that differentiate post-communist systems from one another more generally, for example, "the preponderance of the state over society" (Sarty 2024, 127). Others include the degree of elite unity in times of leadership transition (Hale 2005), the types of linkages that exist between economic and political power, and the impact of conditionality by the European Union in acceding countries (Vachudova 2009).

The one feature that Sarty attributes the most importance to, however, in explaining Russia's attack on Ukraine, is "the ceaseless quest for security in conditions of relative backwardness," and indeed the paramount impact of the "security imperative" (Sarty 2024, 127). No doubt this is an important factor that drove Russia's 2022 war on Ukraine, along with Russia's "status aspirations" (Götz and Staun 2022). But as constructivist theorists and the 'ontological security' school emphasize (Akchurina and Della Sala 2018; Mitzen 2006; Moulioukova and Kanet 2021), a state's definition of security is constructed, not given and is closely tied to notions of identity. If Sarty is correct that Russian leaders are preoccupied with security, one should examine what Russia's current leaders mean by security. Few would claim, and probably Putin himself does not and did not believe that NATO, Ukraine, or the EU was going to attack Russia; thus, there was no material threat to Russia's security. However, for Russia's current leaders, security is apparently understood to equate to Russia's hegemony in its neighbourhood. Tom Casier calls this idea "no great Russia without greater Russia" (Casier 2023), while Götz and Staun (2022, 491) point to the Russian leadership view that a few great powers "are entitled to have their own spheres of influence, whereas the sovereignty of smaller states in negotiable." On this point, Western leaders and many scholars have 'read Russia' (or at least Putin) quite correctly but are unprepared to accede to the implications of Russia's position. Most Western leaders have chosen to challenge this position, in other words, to reject the notion that large states have a right to hegemony over weaker and smaller neighbouring states. Thus, the problem may not be 'misreading Russia' but rather contesting Russia's reading of itself. History and political culture, of course, matter, but this does not mean that other nations need to accept the narrative about history and culture put forth by authoritarian leaders. In accepting that narrative, Western actors would, in fact, reinforce whatever inevitability Sarty may see in Russia's actions. On the contrary, in supporting those Russians who choose to endorse other more liberal and less aggressive identity narratives, Western voices are affirming Russia's possibility of choice. I stand on that side of the debate. Both as a social scientist and as a human being, I stand with Alexander Gabuev's (2023) view that the Russian state's path is the result of choices, primarily of Russia's elites. That said, the war in Ukraine is a critical juncture for Russia, with path dependency in the direction of continued authoritarianism, although this also is not inevitable or predetermined.

Certainly, Sarty is correct that we should strive to 'read Russia' better if that means trying to understand the depth and breadth of that complex society and polity. We should also recognize that current choices are constrained and influenced by history and culture. However, they are choices, and our task as social scientists is to understand what influences them. That requires a deeper knowledge of Russia, including its language, society, culture, history, and politics. Nevertheless, this should not be done in isolation, with an assumption that Russia is totally unique and, therefore,

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exempt from social and political dynamics that affect other societies and polities, and we should not bow to the temptation of determinism, which can lead to fatalism and complacency.

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