Understanding Gaps, Paradoxes and Space: A New American GPS for American Foreign Policy Prospects

By David Grunwald

**In The Beginning**

Vladimir Lenin once said we must at least consider others perception of reality. This includes the idea that we must speak the Russian language in order to understand the country whether we agree or disagree with its current policies.

This is a bold attempt to present Russia in American terms as they see themselves in order to give our policymakers, often fed institutional meed from hands understandably afraid to lose untenured positions, a more complete picture.

Early agrarian societies suffered from low productivity, insecurities from invasion, crop failure and natural disasters. Russia remained overwhelmingly agrarian with closed villages called “Mir” which incubated myths, chiefly the social insurance myth that required a head leader, and taboos that kept the society closed. Normal progression to property-based development were consistently interfered with by the growing autocratic power which was never really open to reform.

Tsardom in Russia persisted for centuries because it acted as a mythic and symbolic center of social order, offering psychological insurance in an uncertain agrarian world which led to specialization of violence and organized territorial aggression. Until the social insurance myth collapsed completely after World War One, it endured through a blend of Orthodox belief, autocratic centralization, popular myth, and political necessity. It was the emotional and metaphysical keystone of the entire Russian social edifice. Each succeeding Tsar either widened or blocked efforts to close the gap.

**Peter the Great**

On February 8, 1696, Peter the Great’s disabled brother Ivan died leaving young Peter I sole Tzar of Russia. Elite tension, the spring in the machine of Russian politics, continued to shape events which reflected the central themes in Russian history.

The Russian “gap” between reality and expectation was born and with it four centuries of blood, sweat and tears.

The Petrine ideology institutionalized the state as an organizing force, embedded rank, personalistic rule and loyalty as permanent hierarchical markers in the Russian elite in order to exploit all available resources in the country thus sealing autocracies hold over the Russian land. His far-reaching reforms, many which still are evident in Russia today, gave birth to Russian paradoxes, gaps and issues with space in the physical and non-physical sense.

To understand Russia, one must know the Steppe, a vast, treeless grassland stretching across southern Russia and parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, historically serving as both a natural corridor for migration and invasion and a critical zone for agriculture and imperial expansion.

The Russian Steppe has deeply influenced the national psyche, shaping enduring concepts that persist in modern Russia. Its vast, borderless landscape fostered a mentality of expansion, a fluid sense of boundaries, and a strategic reliance on geographic depth for security—seen today in Russia’s emphasis on buffer zones and sphere-of-influence politics. The Steppe’s history of nomadic warfare ingrained a valorization of strength, mobility, and centralized authority, while its open chaos symbolizes both freedom and the need for control. This duality fuels a cultural tension between order and lawlessness, mirrored in the coexistence of autocracy and informal networks. Finally, the Steppe’s existential vastness continues to feed a sense of Russian uniqueness—spiritually, civilizationally, and fundamentally distinct from the West.

Russia’s current leader, Vladimir Putin, compared Russia’s war with Ukraine as a battle for Russian values which form the very basis of its existence. He has tapped into the deep, multidimensional matrix of Russian mythos.

Putin said in 2025, “Peter the Great waged the Great Northern War for 21 years. It would seem that he was at war with Sweden, and he took something from them. He did not take anything from them, he returned [what was Russia’s].”[[1]](#footnote-1) Left out was the fact that the plan for the war was consummated in 1698 with the Polish-Lithuanian King Augustus after a three day bachannalia which included twelve kegs of Hungarian wine and unspecified quantities of champaign and other alcohol. Peters’s plan unsuprisingly weakened Poland and Augustus’ rule and helped create a civil war there by allowing his unpaid Saxon troops to plunder the countryside. Poland became a ‘wayside inn for unwanted and non-paying guests.’[[2]](#footnote-2) The war left hundreds of thousands dead and the villages decimated.

Peter expanded the Russian empire in the West and North and Catherine continued to expand it into the West and South in the Crimea and into the Black Sea. Unsurprisingly, a look at the Correlates of War territorial dataset (1816-2018) confirms that Russian territorial acquisition was in most all cases forced whereas the U.S preference was for purchasing new lands, the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and Alaska (1867) being some of the largest. American interest in Canada as a 51st state has a financial aspect as does cash offerings for geostratigically placed Greenland.

In post-communist Russia, the dual state persisted. Richard Sakwa writes that “the administrative regime stood over and assumed a tutelary relationships with the institutions of the constitutional state (rule of law, competitive elections, the free media, parliament and the federal system).”[[3]](#footnote-3) It would seem Russian history has come full circle back to Peter the Great.

Perhaps few American leaders understand the Russian “frequency” because it is not possible to learn about Russia in English books only. American sources tend to come from government and academia with a few exceptions made for journalists and writers. Many have never seen the Soviet Union or had meaningful interactions with its writers and artists.

The echo chamber of Russian policy discussion has been the purview of a select few. George Kennan was different and this was his strength and allure. We remember him for his “Long Telegram” and the policy of muscular containment which others drew from it. Too bad he never followed up his short analysis of Chekov who really described the failure of communism due to its failure to recognize the supremacy of art or science over political dogma.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Chekhov’s realism, a persistent strain of Russian reality, forces the reader to recognize that corruption isn’t just an institutional disease but a deeply human one—often quiet, rationalized, and socially tolerated. The key question in Communist and autocratic societies that struggle with corruption and nepotism is Juvenal’s age old question *‘quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*’ or ‘who will guard the guards’.

One must walk the wash of Russian history which begins with the Steppe. One must read Pasternak and Tsvetaeva in the original, cry with Blok and listen to Trotsky as he sat at the apex and directed of a wave of Dostoyevskian *rational* rage, the “most repellent and most dreadful kind there can be”, that swept across the country after World War One.[[5]](#footnote-5) Today’s form of state sponsored “Propaganda by Deed” includes assassination, mass arrest and persecution of political opponents in the name of security. Like all protection rackets, often the danger comes *from the same group* offering protection.

The problem with knowing all this is that it doesn’t fund rockets, tanks, bombs and bombers. One must fashion an enemy as a faceless block as was done in the Cold War and is now the case with the Chinese. Then you need to translate public trust into financial capital which was first perfected by Jay Cooke in the financing of the American Civil War. This is not a new sentiment and was even recorded by many ex-Soviet citizens after the Soviet fall. In Svetlana Alexievich’s 2017 book “Secondhand Time” one interviewee reminisced that without war everything collapsed. But renewed war was not long in coming for both sides. As Trotsky once quipped: “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.” There is a Russian saying that seems to have been borne out over Russia’s long conflict-ridden history: the axe survives the master (Топор пережил хозяина).

Transducing threats into action also requires “spin” and this was precisely what Henry Kissinger provided often making things worse for ordinary people. Jussi Hanhimaki in his book “The Flawed Architect” suggests that the South Asian Crisis in 1971 leading to Bangladeshi nationhood was irrelevant to Kissinger’s triangular diplomacy yet it happened, displacing millions of people (UNHR estimated 14 million) and led to the systematic rape of between 200-300,000 women.

Was it a failure of a kind that thrives in the current system of things, yet offers remedies that make things much worse? Is this not the sting of retributive memory that Russia inflicts upon itself in every age?

Perhaps the real value discerned from Kissinger’s “triangulation” policy is that even Mao was not immune from realpolitik. Ideological rigidity proved pliable. When it came to ideology, China was and is a dual track country, meaning that its leadership principles are realpolitik wrapped in a Communist/Capitalist shell. Looking at things without labels is an interesting exercise.

This bears the question: do ideologies matter?

Russia’s “hybrid” mish-mash is an example of a belief system spun from three different strands of legacy systems: Autocracy, Bolshevism and Post-Communism thought. The end product, Putinism, lacks coherence and is in a sense indescribable save for bits and pieces of leadership “thought”. Perhaps the idea of ideology is a cosmetological part of the makeup of the nation-state with each having a particular “worldview”; the way it wishes others to see it when it looks at itself in the mirror? It can be argued that ideologies contribute to a worldview by offering a structured lens through which individuals and societies interpret political, moral, historical, and economic realities. In doing so, they help legitimize and reinforce the nation-state as both a political and imagined community which exists and does not exist at the same time.

If changing ideologies don’t matter, then what does? Have first principles gone the way of the dodo bird or great auk? What is it exactly that is holding countries together?

In America is it nihilistic inertia, spun from poorly functioning institutions, corrupted middling politicos, lack of new ideas, economic malaise or hesitation, fear of violence, a middle class that has now become a dead weight on innovation and change where the operational of logical power takes over on autopilot? We often think of political history as a contest between ideologies—capitalism versus socialism, democracy versus authoritarianism. But what if the most defining feature of our era is not the clash of ideas, *but the erosion of belief itself*? In a world where Mao could align with Nixon, and where democratic nations “muddle through” while authoritarian ones mimic ideological legitimacy, perhaps realpolitik has outlived the doctrines it once disguised.

Like electricity, Russia’s alternating current moves between fear-based frequencies and past achievements and unchanging patterns of hardship and resignation (see Checkhov's story Gusev and Panpipes). "Programming” passes the collection of traumas, wounds, and twisted belief systems down from generation to generation. In living in the past collective trauma, Russia has set herself apart to continually abet suffering on a massive scale, replaying the same tragedies in different ages.  It's not that an accurate reality isn't available, it's just not part of the system to accept and foster a different way even if that means giving yourself the short end of the stick. You can take the peasant out of the village but you can’t take the village out of the peasant.

Imagine the psychological damage caused by paying a hundred thousand families death benefits for taking their kid to war? My grandfather built gear differentials for World War Two trucks and always referred to the work as “blood money.” Everybody, including the truck drivers and munitions workers, knows when killing is involved. Heinrich Böll once wrote, ‘Everything bad comes from those resounding voices; those resounding voices started the war, and those resounding voices regulate the worst war of all, the war at railway stations.’

It is a common fallacy that Russia has always been isolated and enigmatic. This may appear so due to simple geography, but Russia has been one of the most open societies since Peter. Its changing conceptions amidst continuity and change has been key to understanding its people and leadership which quite often mirror one another and keep a keen eye on the West. And as much as the Russians accuse the West of illusion, they are a living example of the power and manipulation of myth. Not lost on Russia’s current leader, Raeff’s observation holds: Russia’s last emperor forfeited his personal authority, and this gave the *coup de grâce* to the myths and traditions on which the imperial system was based. Losing touch with the people and refusing to service myths are two key things every Russian leader must heed to stay in power. Putin is constantly on the radio and in the public eye meeting with mothers of lost soldiers, addressing key bodies and giving chatty interviews where he weighs in on daily events.

Yet despite the pomp and effort, perhaps a larger missed picture emerges of entropy and how institutions seem unable to control its course. What nation has yet mastered the art of the demise? Shelley’s “Dark Spirit of the desart rune” includes the passing of autocratic rule, comparing it with an old once mighty oak now covered with rot:

Thou seemest of this spot the King,  
And with a regal power  
Such like that race all sap away  
*And yet upon the spoil decay.*

Speaking truth to power has always been risky business in Russia. It is surprising how often it has happened. In reading Alexander Radishchev’s “Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow (1790)” he depicts scenes of poverty, oppression, and injustice, describing how peasants were treated as property, subject to arbitrary violence, exploitation, and forced labor. Tsarina Catherine found the book’s portrayals so threatening that its author was sentenced to death later commuted to 10 years in Siberia. This tradition of indiscriminantly killing the messenger persists to this day as does the tension surrounding offering solutions in the name of the people who for the most part are living in their own spheres, a legacy from communist times. Russia’s leaders have always considered their masses as a group having better eyes than manners and mostly living lives reduced to will and utility, their situation more or less accurately reflecting a composite of secret desires of whatever age the people belonged to.

Alongside the Soviet empire of ideology which Russians claimed to have suffered under as much as other nations, Karl Schlögel writes in his book “The Soviet Century”, the distribution of medals in Russia created an aristocracy of its own. It was only during World War One that the regular rank and file qualified for rewards for fighting. It’s also no secret that the Soviets ravaged the environment and took whatever they wanted from the society. Perhaps the biggest unspoken waste was the millions of vendible human beings devoured in the blind and often mad drive to “modernize” the country. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, now used for kindling fires, became a lethal purge list.

Radishchev’s character Karp Demen’tich, the passive bureaucrat that facilitates the exploitive system, thrives in Putin’s Russia because modern authoritarianism does not require widespread cruelty —only widespread disengagement. The system runs on the labor of individuals who routinely compartmentalize, rationalize, or look away—the very tendencies Radishchev first diagnosed as flourishing in Russia in the late 18th century. This is not to deny the existence of the Joycean “Sordid Sam’s” or “dour, decent, deblancer” types who destabilize things under the guise of rectitude as all systems run on anger generated by institutional discontent.

Once again, it is a mistake to think of Russian, or any society for that matter, as a faceless block. The American portrayal of China in particular is a Cold War advanced state of reductionism—flattening a complex, dynamic society with a rich history into a monolithic adversary, which obscures internal diversity, competing interests, and evolving political realities. It also limits our ability to design and carry out advanced policy thinking because we limit what can be known and what can be predicted leading to ill-defined properties and faulty problem definitions.

This paper examines Russian behavior through an analytical triad of gaps, paradoxes and space with a *quantum-like* twist.

**Quantum**

Quantum refers to the smallest indivisible unit of energy or matter in a physical system, governed by probabilistic laws that differ fundamentally from classical Newtonian physics. Peter Katzenstein writes that “Quantum mechanics puts uncertainty, indeterminancy, potentiality and possibility, rather than constraint and necessity, at its center.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In quantum metaphor, an attempt to provide a judgement-free platform, the security gap in premodern societies can be seen as a state of high social entropy and probabilistic incoherence, where structures of meaning and authority are fluid and indeterminate. Tsardom emerged as a kind of wave-function collapse—a symbolic act of coherence that fixed diffuse social potential into a hierarchical order. It entangled the subject and sovereign across vast spaces, linked distant lives through shared ritual, myth, and obedience. Functioning as a metaphysical measurement, the tsar’s presence stabilized existential uncertainty, much like an observer in quantum theory collapses possibility into actuality. Through divine observation and sacred symbolism, tsardom anchored the law, ensured order, and crystallized collective identity in an otherwise turbulent social field.

William Faulkner in his 1932 novel "Light of August" has a character named Byron Bunch who opines, "A man will talk about how he’d like to escape from living folks. But it’s the dead folks that do him the damage.” We are reminded that Russian identity and policy are deeply entangled with ghosts—of empire, revolution, and war—that has limited its freedom. It has shaped its ideology, and justified both internal repression and external aggression in the name of Russian statehood. Often it has colored and fetishized the US reaction to it.

It can be argued that the Cold War emphasized Russian dates like 1917 in order to build a monolithic, essentially faceless story of Communist takeover and Soviet power. In fact writers like Chekhov and Dostoyevsky who described the *real* Russian society that persists, were ignored. Marc Raeff writes that mobility restrictions were paramount to the build up to the Russian Revolution. The existing autocratic order left massive gaps between civil society and government. Society became paralyzed, with no hope as typically found in nihilistic periods. In Imperial Russia, where a unified code of law never existed, the court of popular opinion was coopted by a group of professional revolutionaries whose slogans echoed the people's desire for Peace, Land and Bread.

In Russia words matter. A. F. Kerensky made a bad situation worse in his response to the Petrograd Soviets "Order No 1" essentially placing soldiers under Soviet command and thereby creating insubordination. His Declaration of Soldier’s Rights issued in May 1917 as a thinly veiled preparation for an unpopular June Offensive, attempted to reintroduce control over the soldiers with the fateful article 14 which stipulated that "in a combat situation, the commander had the right, under his personal responsibility, to take all measures, up to and including the use of armed force, against subordinates who did not comply with his orders. These measures *did not* count as disciplinary measures.

As Raeff correctly concludes, the problem isn't so much whether the evolution begun in 1861 could have ended someplace other than in revolution. The problem rather is to understand the process of change in Russia as a whole by determining other possible courses and outcomes. These are one clear way to reverse engineer the many myths that collectively constitute Russia. Imagine if Alexei Navalny had become the Russian president? Or Yulia Tymoshenko, a prominent Ukrainian politician and former Prime Minister, had stayed in power after 2014?

Three interlocking concepts—gaps, paradox, and space—offer a powerful lens for understanding the complexities of Russia’s internal development and foreign policy. These ideas serve as a kind of historical positioning system, helping to locate and trace enduring patterns in Russian behavior. Together, they illuminate the strategic, cultural, and psychological ingredients that have shaped Russian policy from the imperial era to today. They are as important to clear policy making because they provide an open look at Russia as it really is.

The concept of *gaps* highlight the persistent disconnections between how Russia views itself and reality, its institutions and society, elites and the masses, or state power and civic life. Secondly, *paradoxes* refer to deep contradictions within Russian identity and policy, such as efforts to modernize without embracing liberalization. Peter’s reforms have come full circle as the gaps created in the Russian physical and existential space created paradoxes that have never been resolved. Finally, the idea of physical and non-physical *space* encompasses both the physical vastness of the Russian landscape and the symbolic or civilizational meanings attached to territorial control and identity.

Russian foreign policy is testing traditionalist IR theory. For example Tsygankov’s schools of fundamental orientations offer alternatives to classical IR theory: Westernism, statism, and civilizationism. At root leaders like Polish born Zbignew Brzezinski extemporized when he argued that in order to survive Russia would have no choice but to align itself as a junior partner of the West. The Cold War formatted West was never going to make Russia a full partner in anything. And Russia was never going to accept anything less.

In the emerging lens of quantum physics, the concepts of gaps, paradoxes and space reflect the deep ambiguities found in political and philosophical thought. Explained this way, gaps emerge in the form of quantum discontinuities—moments where particles leap from one energy level to another without traversing the space in between, much like the epistemic or institutional voids that separate ideals from realities in complex societies. Space, in the quantum realm, becomes abstract and probabilistic, existing not as fixed geography but as a *field of potential states*—comparable to symbolic or civilizational space in geopolitical theory, where presence is asserted not only physically but ideologically. Paradoxes are at the heart of quantum behavior, where elements are both waves and particles, alive and dead, observed and changed—mirroring the unresolved contradictions in systems that attempted to modernize without liberalizing, or centralize power while invoking popular legitimacy. Together, these concepts reveal a universe—and a political reality—structured not by certainty, but by tension, indeterminacy, and the coexistence of opposing poles each emitting its own truth. In a curious way, both the US and Russia need one another if only to provide a mirror image. The likeness of both countries was one of the profound insights I gleaned from my time inside the Soviet Union.

Viewing Russian international behavior through quantum metaphors—such as superposition, entanglement, and quantum tunneling—offers fresh insights beyond traditional frameworks. For example, Russia often operates in a state of superposition, simultaneously projecting contradictory identities and goals (e.g., European partner and civilizational rival). Its deep entanglement with its historical sphere of influence means its actions are shaped by long-standing and often hidden cultural and geopolitical ties, making its behavior less about immediate interests and more about correcting perceived historical imbalances. Through quantum tunneling, Russia sidesteps conventional international norms by using hybrid tactics and bold, nonlinear strategies, allowing it to exert influence in unexpected ways. The Russian revolution is a prime example of this. Together, these concepts capture the ambiguity, unpredictability, and strategic depth of Russian foreign policy. This unbounded new thinking can open new vistas and insights that are driving change in IR thinking.

Autocratic Russia, like Communist China, is a living unresolved paradox exhibiting contradictions or tensions between two or more seemingly incompatible ideas like autocracy and liberalism. Conditions, or truths that have not been reconciled or resolved on purpose or by accident—these elements continue to exist and influence behavior, thought, or systems which American leadership has not yet properly understood. Richard Sakwa suggests Russian foreign policy is driven by ‘patronal autocracy’, where the needs of the national interest are subordinated to domestic political needs of a corrupt authoritarian government. Unsurprisingly, Putin has called for the restoration of “vertical of executive power.” Yet, this is too simplistic. Looking closely at the ministers in the current Russian government one can see that personal loyalty is a paramount feature of the members of Russia’s government. The *Siloviki*, or ‘power guys’ unlike the Soviet cliques of old which were based on geography, ethnicity and subject area. This tradition continues as the Russian government is made up of current and former officials from Russia’s security, military, and intelligence services.

Russia’s lack of diversity at the top positions can mean predictable but inflexible behavior, echo chamber dynamics, a hardening of zero-sum logic, decision making fragility and lack of new ideas to the challenges associated with war and technology now facing a rapidly changing world.

**The Russian Gap**

Peter the Great’s “Window on the West” created a profound gap between Russia’s self-perception and its lived reality, most importantly by imposing Western models of governance, culture, and appearance onto a largely traditional, agrarian society. His top-down modernization—such as the introduction of Western dress codes and court etiquette—was intended to make Russia appear European, but it alienated the vast majority of Russians who remained deeply rooted in Orthodox and peasant traditions. This gap has never closed in part because of its usefulness to the regimes that followed up until the present day.

Second, Peter’s creation of a new capital, St. Petersburg, symbolized a dramatic spatial and civilizational shift: a Western-facing “window to Europe” built at enormous human cost on swampy land, representing the tsar’s desire to transform Russia’s image more than its substance. Such megaprojects created a template for future works that often failed with huge implications. Several the come to mind including Soviet Collectivization in the 1930’s which killed millions of people, the environmental destruction associated with the running of the “steel city” at Magnitorsk and the nuclear fiasco at Chernobyl which I experienced as a student in Austria.

Lastly, his military and bureaucratic reforms, while effective in strengthening the state, entrenched a service nobility loyal to the crown rather than to Russian society, deepened the divide between the Westernized elite and the untransformed masses.

Together, these changes projected an image of modernity while leaving most of Russia behind, creating a psychological and social gap that has haunted the Russian identity ever since. The fight over who gets to close the gap, making Russia what it often can only wish itself to be, has been a moving target for centuries. The gap it seems, widens and closes with each iteration of Russian history. And it always points backwards because the Russian leaders appear to have no other raison d'être than regime survival. Peter the Great’s playbook is current reading in Russia’s leading circles.

The opening and closing of gaps has been both a physical and existential mainstay in Russia since Peter’s time. The fall of the Soviet Union kick started the gap recovery efforts which took place causing a reimagined physical and non-physical course of action which exposed the true nature of a Eurasian land power. To be sure, this proclivity had always been a part of the Russian journey and should have surprised no one. Possession of Ukraine was a necessary key to Russia’s claim of being a Eurasian power. A key sticking point in American-Russian relations comes when the US fails to cater to Russia’s image of itself. And there are real reasons for not doing so. This led to the age old Anglo-Russian dilemma succinctly expressed by Sakwa who weighed “the cost of including Russia in the Atlantic alliance, [but] the price of premature Russian inclusion entailed the dilution of EU and NATO principles.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Recent examples of Russian aggression include territorial grabs Crimea 2014, Donbas, Georgia, Syria and most recently plan to control Moldovan lands. Symbolic gaps can be found in the concepts of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), Gumilev’s Eurasianism, Russian Orthodox revival, and Russia as a “civilizational” power encompassing Europe and Asia. Some might argue that Russian support for international sovereignty rather that international liberalism is a stalking horse for reigniting Russia’s age old gap crusade to capture physical and non-physical space.

The Eurasian movement seeks to combine the spaces and bind them together with powerful strands of imperial nostalgia, anti-Western, anti-liberal, spiritual and a messianic vision of a world order with Russia playing an important, unique role. Expounded by Alexander Dugin, it promotes a Russian-centered civilization distinct from both the West and Asia which supports the idea of a multipolar world bound to a sovereign international order. Less examined is the curated domestic “lifeworld” which relies heavily on looped historical mythology, simulated diversity, experiential truth and legitimacy anchors.

**Russian Paradoxes**

A paradox is a statement or situation that appears self-contradictory or illogical, but may contain a deeper truth upon reflection. It challenges expectations by revealing hidden complexity or irony—for example, *“less is more.”*

Diplomatic paradoxes, like quantum phenomena, challenge classical logic. They reveal that states can occupy contradictory roles, that perception shapes action, and that context determines meaning. Understanding them requires moving beyond binary thinking—just as quantum physics forced a rethink of reality, diplomacy must grapple with layered, entangled, and uncertain truths. Locality in Newtonian physics has a requirement that “each physical event or change has a physical cause and that this cause can be localized in the immediate spacetime neighborhood of its effects.”[[8]](#footnote-8) A classical example would be the velocity behavior of charged particles in electromagnetism. But what of hidden things like ideas and beliefs that threaten just as much as missle and drone attacks, armies, food shortages and other “physical” threats. Might there also be overriding global factors at work that do not correspond to a linear way or link directly to local events?

Russia’s ideological threat to the West has evolved from imperial autocracy, to revolutionary communism, to authoritarian nationalism. In each case, it offered a rival vision of political and moral order—rejecting the West’s core values of liberal democracy, individual rights, and open societies. The enduring anxiety in the West has been that Russia doesn’t just oppose its power—it denies the legitimacy of the Western worldview just as Communism was viewed as an attack on the Western system.

Russian history beginning with Peter the Great created one of the most paradoxical societies on record. Post-Petrine Russia has been marked by profound and persistent contradictions in its political, cultural, and social development.

The ribs of this story is autocracy’s constant struggle to control the freedom of its citizens, who paradoxically grew more radical with each wave of state repression. The ultimate paradox was a history of bloody revolts against tsardom by rebels who sought to preserve the throne for themselves.

From Peter’s time on Russia’s push toward modernization has been combined with autocratic curtailing of liberties which often culminated in violence. The result was that civil society remained embryonic with the poles between central power and the radical intellectuals, like lava, fluctuating and hardening over the centuries. Anna Aruntunyan in her “Rebel Russia” presents the case that this dynamic between autocratic power and rebels and their centuries-long dance of dissent and repression remains a crucial part of the Russian story to this very day and includes singers, musicians and actors who are threatened with a “foreign agent” status. This includes the queen of Soviet pop Alla Pugacheva, now in exile, whose voice was ubiquitous throughout the Soviet Union in the 1980’s.

In contrast, the Newtonian foundations of American development matched the mechanical foundations and minimalist doctrines created at its inception — fashioning a carberator for the distribution of power. A nation of laws, it rejected absolutism and took aim at royal power. As Emerson wrote of the American experience: ‘Our winged thoughts are turned to poultry’. In America Walt Whitman was distancing himself from America’s Putitan, hebraic past. Russia faced rising opposition from both liberals and radicals. Alexander II retreated into conservatism in the 1870s, tightening censorship and delaying further reforms. In 1881, he was assassinated by the revolutionary group People’s Will, who saw his reforms as too limited and slow.

The rural Russian peasantry, today being trepanned into war, became the loadstar for extremist ideas and revolution reaching the apogee of “scientific worldview”, heavily influenced by Newtonian physics, under communist doctrine. The Russian metaphysical religious worldview of 16th century Europe along with ancient history has been reified as a pillar of regime support. Putin recently described events surrounding Russia’s founding in 862 with the development of Russian power in Kiev and Novgorod, the Austrian plot to weaken Russia by promoting ideas of Ukraine and Ukrainianization before World War One and the idea that Ukraine was “an artificial state shaped by Stalin’s will.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Russia never left the autocratic mold which overshadowed all else in its drive to protect the imperial system. This caused the cataclysm of World War One which then continued on to World War Two.

Peter’s Westernization paradox: a European-style state ruling over a semi-feudal society continues to echo in contemporary Russia, where modern institutions and infrastructure coexist with deeply entrenched authoritarian, oligarchic, and informal power structures.

Modern Russia reflects enduring form paradoxes rooted in Peter the Great’s legacy of Westernization without social transformation. It presents the form of a democracy but functions as an autocracy; it boasts advanced technology while operating through inefficient, informal bureaucracy. The country is integrated into global systems yet suppresses civil society at home. Gleaming modern cities contrast sharply with underdeveloped rural areas, and elites live Westernized lifestyles even as the state promotes anti-Western nationalism. These contradictions reveal Peter’s vision: a state that outwardly mirrors European structures while retaining deeply hierarchical and autocratic foundations.  
  
Peter’s paradox — Western form, Russian substance — lives on. Russia today often mimics the structures of the West (democracy, legality, modernity) while preserving a deeply patrimonial and hierarchical reality, much like the hybrid system Peter left behind. This unresolved tension between state modernization and societal transformation remains a defining feature of Russian (and Chinese) political culture.

**The Reign of Catherine**

Catherine the Great’s paradox—promoting Enlightenment ideals while preserving autocratic power—finds clear echoes in contemporary Russia. Her rule exemplified “rational despotism”: adopting the rhetoric of progress, science, and reason while tightly controlling political life. This blend of modernizing discourse and authoritarian governance persists today in several forms.

Just as Catherine selectively embraced Enlightenment values to strengthen autocracy, modern Russia adopts the form and rhetoric of progress—science, modernization, rule of law—while preserving tight political control and ideological conformity. This enduring tension between modernization and repression is the heart of Catherine’s paradox in today’s Russia.

The paradox of Alexander II’s reign lies in his ambitious reforms—especially the emancipation of the serfs in 1861—that aimed to modernize Russia, while retaining autocratic control and failing to empower society meaningfully. Serfs were freed in name, but burdened with debt and restricted mobility, leaving their social and political status little improved. This was also true of the American slaves as “freedom” often meant exploitation and poverty. In Russia the reform financially ruined about a third of the nobility and created a new class of successful peasants named “kulak”. The term (кула́к) in Russian literally means "fist", but historically, it came to refer to a relatively wealthy peasant, especially one who owned land, hired labor, or was seen as economically independent from the collective. It was this group that the Soviets scapegoated in order to block opposition and carry out their brutal policy of collectivization in the 1930’s.

This pattern—reform from above without true liberalization—continues to echo in contemporary Russia. It has a market economy and modern infrastructure, but citizens lack genuine political agency. Economic growth in the 2000s didn’t lead to democratization; political opposition is tightly constrained, and power remains centralized in the presidency. Russia has courts, trial procedures, and codified laws—but judicial decisions often reflect political pressure, especially in cases involving dissent, NGOs, or opposition figures. Regional governors and elected bodies exist, but the Kremlin appoints or removes governors, and regional autonomy is tightly circumscribed by federal control.

Russia saw a more open media landscape in the 1990s–early 2000s, but since then, independent outlets have been shut down, and laws criminalize “extremism,” protests, or “fake news.”

**The Bolshevik Paradox**

Lenin’s revolution promised to resolve the contradictions of capitalism—class inequality, exploitation, and alienation—by creating a state ruled by and for the people. To be sure, its advent represented a stark break with the past finding no reconciliation between industrialism, morality or tsardom. Yet, in practice, it replaced tsarist autocracy with a new form of authoritarian rule, concentrating power in the hands of the Communist Party led by a vanguard and justifying repression as necessary for the people's liberation. Successful peasants, a requirement for a healthy rural economy and strong state, were persecuted under the a program of de-kulakization which claimed millions of victims and filled Russia’s penal colonies called Gulags, with an unlimited source of forced labor.

Dekulakization was a violent class war directed from above, intended to eliminate private farming and enforce state control over agriculture. It was marked by mass arrests, forced deportations, executions, and the destruction of rural life, and is now widely recognized as a major human rights atrocity of the 20th century.

This paradox of a dictatorship in the name of the people remains deeply embedded in modern Russia.

Once again the Russian state presents itself as defending the “true will of the people” against internal and external threats, while silencing independent media, opposition figures, and civil society. Putin’s high approval ratings are often cited as proof of legitimacy, even as elections lack fairness or choice.

The Kremlin promotes “sovereign democracy” and “traditional values” as expressions of national unity, while real political decisions are made by a narrow elite around the president. Local institutions like the ultra-right factions allowed to exist as they are useful to Putin, have little autonomous power.

The Russian government monitors citizens through digital surveillance, tightens control of NGOs and online speech, and uses vague legal categories like “extremism” or “foreign agents” to justify repression—framing it as defense of national stability.

Ordinary Russians are invoked as the moral core of the nation, but they are largely disengaged from or disempowered in the political process. Political participation is ritualized (e.g., elections) rather than substantive.

The Russian state invokes anti-colonial and anti-Western language, portraying itself as a revolutionary counterweight to the West—while enforcing deeply conservative social policies and defending elite privilege.

**Stalin**

Stalin’s Soviet Union achieved rapid industrialization, military strength, and global power—but through immense human suffering: forced collectivization, labor camps, purges, and widespread surveillance. This created a deep paradox: modern progress built on mass repression. That legacy still shapes Russia today, where state-driven development coexists with authoritarian control including state sponsored murder.

The Russian state directs large-scale projects (e.g., energy pipelines, military modernization, infrastructure like the Crimean Bridge), while jailing critics, banning protests, and censoring media. Progress remains tightly coupled with control.

Russia glorifies state power, military strength, and historical victories (especially WWII), while oppositionists are labeled “foreign agents,” traitors, or extremists. Criticism is framed as weakening the nation—justifying repression in the name of national strength.

The Russian state uses facial recognition, online monitoring, and internet censorship tools (like RuNet), often justified as anti-terrorism or protecting national sovereignty. Citizens are expected to report suspicious activity, echoing Stalin-era informant culture.

Official memory selectively emphasizes Russia’s triumphs (especially WWII) while downplaying or justifying Stalin’s crimes. Discussion of state repression is discouraged or criminalized, creating a controlled memory culture that sustains state legitimacy.

Workers face pressure to serve national goals (especially during wartime mobilization or sanctions), while labor rights, union organizing, and political expression remain limited. The emphasis is on discipline and loyalty over rights and autonomy.

**Putin’s Paradoxes**

Vladimir Putin’s rule is marked by a web of paradoxes that reveal deep contradictions in contemporary Russian governance and ideology. On the one hand, he presents himself as a champion of a strong, moral, centralized state; on the other, the state functions as a vehicle for elite self-enrichment, tolerating corruption in exchange for loyalty. Similarly, while advocating conservative values and stability, his regime frequently engages in disruptive, revolutionary tactics—from hybrid warfare to media manipulation—undermining the very order it claims to defend. Putin’s emphasis on traditionalism coexists uneasily with radically destabilizing behavior, both at home and abroad.

These contradictions extend to Russia’s relationship with the West and its own imperial identity. Putin denounces Western influence while Russia’s elites rely heavily on Western institutions, education, and technology. He frames Russia as a guardian of national sovereignty, yet violates the sovereignty of neighbors like Ukraine and Georgia. The regime demands international respect for its independence while denying that same right to others, revealing a selective approach to international norms. Similarly, Putin’s rhetoric of multipolarity—an appeal to global equality—masks a deeper belief in Russia’s unique civilizational destiny and privileged status.

Underlying all of this is a tension between pragmatism and myth. Putin often postures as a realist—focused on power, security, and national interest—but increasingly invokes messianic narratives: Russia as the Third Rome, a spiritual savior in an existential struggle against the West. Crisis and nostalgia are used as governing tools: Soviet victories are celebrated even as communism is rejected, and domestic stability is promised through the constant invention of enemies and emergencies. These paradoxes are not failures of ideology, but features of a regime that sustains itself through selective memory, myth-making, tension and managed contradiction.

**Russian Space**

*Mos maiorum* refers to the unwritten code of traditional Roman values, practices, and social norms passed down from earlier generations. It upheld ideals like duty, loyalty, honor, and authority, serving as the moral foundation of Roman society. Russia has experienced the hollowing out of values three times in its history, first under the reforms handed down by Peter the Great, essentially offering a kind of protection racket for state service, then in the 20th century following World War One and Two, both times leading to dramatic social, political and economic changes in Russian society and how other nations viewed Russia.

When subjected to nihilism, a societies unwritten code loses its binding force. Tradition is viewed as arbitrary, moral duties are dismissed, and core values are hollowed out or manipulated. This erosion leads to a breakdown in shared meaning, where personal gain replaces public virtue and societal norms lose coherence. Today’s Russia has restored the template ‘in place of laws there are loyalties.’

In Russia the political space was never really acceeded by its changing rulers or if it was, it ended in the replacement or banishment of liberal-leaning persons or those like world renown pianist Evgeny Kissin, who publically expressed opposition to the Ukrainian war. This growing list includes the former mayor of St. Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak, Yegor Gaidar, Anatoly Chubais, Boris Nemtsov and Alexai Navalny. Russian poet Boris Pasternak, known in the West as the author of Dr. Zhivago, knew the danger faced when competing for political space in Stalin’s Russia and made the arduous transition from poetry to prose. The execution of poet Nikolai Gumilev in 1921, husband of Russia’s most famous poet Anna Akhmatova, was a clear warning to anyone who rocked the boat. It is ironic that many of Putin’s ideas about a standalone Russian civilization —Eurasianism are purported to come from the writings of Gumilev’s son Lev who died in 1992.

Evocational space in Russian IR is a symbolic domain where strategic narratives, commemorative events, or visual rhetoric evoke shared historical experiences—particularly trauma, victory, or loss—which in turn shape public and elite support for domestic or foreign policy choices. Like Edith Stein’s *motivations* in phenomenology—where meaning emerges from prior intentional structures—Russia’s actions in IR are often structured by evoked meanings rooted in collective memory and are *motivants*, not merely a cause but a meaningful impetus that structures perception, action, or belief based on lived experience*.*  This has led to the rise of nationalist and neo-imperial discourses to reimagine lost non-physical space. The nation itself is not a thing, but *a process*—a dynamic, shared mental construct, fragile and temporal, yet capable of anchoring immense structures of meaning and power.

The state crafts a phenomenological environment where perception and affect become instruments of international behavior. Russian actions are not simply rational or strategic but emotionally and historically motivated acts, where narrative, memory, and identity converge within the architecture of statecraft. In fashioning a link between Imperial, Bolshevik and the rudderless post-Soviet period, Putin and his regime completed the separation of the Soviet past and amplified distinctly Russian elements and themes fashioning a powerful tool with which to shape Russian opinion and set a more Russian-centric international policy.

**Nihilism**

The *age of nihilism* in Russia—most powerfully portrayed by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in works like *Demons* (*The Devils* or *The Possessed*)—was a period in the mid-to-late 19th century marked by disillusionment with traditional authority, religious faith, and moral order. Russian nihilists rejected metaphysical values, the Church, and the tsarist state, advocating for radical transformation through science, reason, and often destruction. For Dostoyevsky, this wasn’t just a rebellion—it was a spiritual and moral crisis. Nihilism was not merely ideological but existential: it denied any ultimate foundation for truth or morality, reducing human life to a kind of utilitarian calculus, later providing fertile soil for the trained professional revolutionaries fed on the examples of Rakhmetov and later Lenin.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, there existed profound disillusionment with capitalism, war and pressures of modernization.

Might we be soon witnessing the return of nihilism in Russia?

Wendy Brown describes how, when foundational boundaries collapse, values become cheapened. This can lead to the erosion of distinctions between the personal and public, juridical and political, theatrical and real, and the authentic and instrumental.

Russian nihilism in the 19th century arose from a profound rejection of traditional authority, religion, and social norms, fueled by philosophical skepticism and frustration with autocratic repression. It embodied a radical, revolutionary spirit among the youth who sought to dismantle existing structures in favor of reason, science, and social progress. In contrast, contemporary Russian nihilism reflects the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, characterized by widespread disillusionment with war and conflict, cynicism toward institutions, and the erosion of clear distinctions between truth and spectacle. Rather than an active revolt, modern nihilism often manifests as apathy, fatalism, or a resigned acceptance of political manipulation and societal fragmentation. Together, these periods reveal how nihilism in Russia has shifted from a force of revolutionary upheaval to one of cultural and political malaise amid the breakdown of foundational values which paradoxically are occuring inside a conservative, tradition bound country.

**In Place of an Ideology**

Perhaps the greatest space existing still today in Russia is the fact that civil society has never produced a sustainable ideology or an abiding uniform set of laws. Even the mistakes Russia made are different. There was no Gilded Age in Russia. Recycled myths pervade the landscape today in Putin’s Russia. In our incomplete democracy, the first principles are enshrined in law and separated from the platforms of political parties described by Giovanni Sartori as “transmission belts” between society and leaders. Exisiting between the poles of some centralized autocratic power and a radical intelligentsia, it is unsuprising that Russia failed to develop a coherent set of values, principles and practices that might serve as a participatory guide in civic life. Traditionally this led to a kind of systemic paralysis which meant that change was often not possible without difficulty and violence. This ideological vacuum has been filled in with a kind of post-ideological nationalism harnassed to Vladimir Putin Thought.

Perhaps the ultimate paradox is that Russia, a civilization purporting a unique place in the constellation of nations, is itself without an ideology.

Thusly comes flexible authoritarianism, capable of borrowing from both past and future, left and right, truth and fiction. “Putin Thought” is not a philosophy in the traditional sense, but a governing *style*, pragmatic in practice, mythic in justification, whose contradictions are often what enable its resilience. Like the Tsarist predecessors, any movement foreward is trapped in an endless cycle of inability to foster betterment for want of trusted working civic institutions outside the control of an autocrat. This is perhaps the greatest hurdle to a democratic Russia and a substantialist feature embedded since tsarist times. In such systems, the amplification of paradoxes leads to asymmetrical development of political institutions which if left undisturbed open up more possibilities for more radical developments domestically and internationally. Past mistakes are refitted into apologia arias sung by the leadership to reinforce myths and strengthen its hold on the imagination of its citizens. For example, cathartic authoritarianism where punishment is a societal trait and its purging dialectic is one facet of Stalinism which has carried over with its use of force, incarceration, fear, propaganda, and manipulated legality.

Sadly, once such a system establishes itself, there are no limits to the demands it can make on its citizenry. And yet in Russia today there is a belief that the heroic Second World War was won *despite* Stalin’s hardships and not so much because of him or his policies.

**Conclusions**

In Russia, the past shapes the future and in this there is a continuity and even predictability in Russian affairs. The juxtaposition between reality and myth has created gaps between Russian aspirations and capacity, elite goals and public needs. This has always been so, and won’t change soon. Foreign policy has been shaped by sense of strategic gaps left by NATO/EU expansion and the fragmentation of the Russian sphere. The leadership has recaptured Russia’s oppositional imagination along with a willingness to engage in violent territorial expansion because at root the people are willing to acquiesce and play a role as are the elites who profit from the system and are constantly made aware that their positions depend on supporting the regimes stated and unstated goals.

Russian paradoxes have implications for the West. We will need to understand Russia not just through strategic interests but through its historical and psychological geography. One of the most important things we can do is examine American actions through an ego-less quantum lens in order to provide ourselves with a full range of possibilities in order to deliver more complete policies. A quantum lens does not imply relativism or appeasement. Rather, it acknowledges the fluid, entangled, and observer-dependent nature of global politics. By embracing uncertainty, relationality, and multidimensionality, the U.S. can craft a more adaptive, multi-layered strategy that stabilizes the U.S.–Russia relationship — not by freezing it, but by allowing it — and this is key —to *evolve* more constructively, focusing attention on problems that bring about its own solution instead of sterile partisan attacks. For example the Arctic region offers one area where fluid engagement is possible to advance the general welfare of all people by embracing the ambiguity to design adaptive policies. Such thinking might spawn other efforts to move away from the Cold War thinking trap.

If Russia were located where Canada is geographically, the dynamic with US policy would be very different. Indeed it may be that the revolutionary tide against monarchy in the US would have been strangled in the crib. Yet the Internet has essentially created just such proximity. Perhaps for the first time in history the immediacy of events can be seen, felt and heard the world over in seconds.

What is seen in the West as Russia’s persistent inability or unwillingness to resolve their core paradoxes (modernization vs. tradition, empire vs. nation-state) might actually be caused in part by U.S. narratives which actively help construct Russia’s strategic behavior. Every solution to a problem sets in motion a new contradiction. As the US moves away from zero-sum framework, we must accept that U.S. and Russian security postures are structurally entangled: actions by one side directly affect the perception and reaction of the other. This amplification of differences born in the Cold War, is perhaps the most challenging obstacle inherited from the Soviet-US conflict.

Russian foreign policy is not simply reactive but is deeply rooted in a long tradition of navigating insecurity, contradiction, and imperial spatiality. In Christopher Hitchen’s only Foreign Affairs article (a Review Essay) written in 2008, he reveals the idea that Russia discovers new foes in old forms mentioning the poet Pushkin’s warning in 1831 to Western powers to stay out of eastern Europe after tsarist Russia had crushed an independent Poland. The same Pushkin was evoked in 1999 by Igor Ivanov who cautioned NATO from intervening in Kosovo.

The concept of Russian “space” appeared early in the geological political sediment. The concept is deeply connected to both its implicit cultural psychology and its explicit geopolitical motivations. Space in the Russian context is not just physical territory; it is existential, spiritual, and political. It might seem paradoxical that a country with so much land could get so hung up on distances, buffers and messianic messaging — these have been both its savior and burden.

Russia’s role is not only to protect its space but to sanctify and stabilize it, often by extending cultural or political influence over its periphery. For Russia, space is not merely territory—it is a metaphysical condition and a strategic necessity, shaping its actions not only to survive in geography but to justify its place in history. The Brezhnev Doctrine predicated the legitimacy of Soviet intervention on the preservation of socialist states within its sphere, reflecting the Russian idea of space as a protective buffer—where neighboring territories were not merely sovereign lands, but extensions of strategic depth essential to the security and coherence of the Soviet (and historically Russian) spatial order.

Russian actions reflect this triad of gaps, paradoxes and space. The entire history of Russia might be explained by the opening and closing of these “gaps” between what is chooses to see itself as irregardless of reality. Putin’s regime is a deliberate orchestration of paradoxes juggling authoritarianism with democratic rituals, capitalism with cronyism. Perhaps the most difficult concept for Americans is the Russian obsession with space in shaping the Russian mindset. Perhaps most memorable of my experiences travelling to Soviet Moscow by air and rail was the time it took and the endless expanses of virgin land that seemed to stretch an eternity making Russia is its own planet with its own bronze sun.

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