

CURRENT HISTORY

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Russia's Incoherent State

JEREMY MORRIS

Western journalists routinely fall into the trap of presenting Russia as a tightly controlled society with a hands-on leader dictating from the center. In reality, however, the governance provided by the Russian state is incoherent, and Russian society is increasingly shaped by centrifugal processes driving apart the haves and the have-nots. The past twenty years have seen a retreat from the legacy of the Soviet Union, specifically the idea of a “social state” responsible for the welfare of all Russians. This has led to a bifurcation of society into a corrupt “bureaucratic” class dependent on the ruling elite, and the rest of the population.

Ways of Governing

Second in a series

Political analysts typically also take their cue from an image of authoritarian manual control of the Russian state's workings. This gives the misleading impression of a relatively effective translation of command into execution. Even when things go wrong, the people supposedly take solace in believing in the “good tsar” who has their interests at heart. This assumption is often cited to explain why surveys show that Russians remain more or less tolerant of the status quo. Although it is true that President Vladimir Putin has been able to keep up the appearance of being above everyday politics, the state is increasingly viewed as disconnected from ordinary people, arbitrarily punitive, and incompetent.

My argument is informed by the scholarly debate about the nature of the late Soviet system and its failings. The increasingly authoritarian turn of

governance in Russia should not cause us to repeat the mistakes of Sovietology—overestimating the robustness, flexibility, and managerial effectiveness of what only appears to be a comprehensively bureaucratic, Western-style state machine. In this mistaken view, while it is acknowledged that corruption renders Russia hardly a model of efficient governance, somehow the vertical hierarchy of decision making is assumed to result in effective transmission of orders from the center. This presumed efficiency is credited with enabling the completion of prestige projects like the building of a bridge over the Kerch Strait to Crimea after its annexation, or the successful hosting of the 2018 World Cup, despite the lack of transparent economic forces.

However, even at the everyday level, ordinary people encounter an incoherent state at every turn. Consider a few examples from provincial Russia (most of them from my fieldwork in the region of Kaluga, near Moscow):

- The federal Emergencies Ministry parades its high-tech rescue vehicles bought at vast expense, yet it is unable to assist drivers trapped in a snowstorm. The tender for the vehicles entailed juicy kickbacks and markups.
- A town plagued by blackouts and crumbling central heating infrastructure proudly opens a generously funded public bathhouse for which there is no demand. Meanwhile, the town goes without hot water for weeks in winter. The municipal government blames the private heating company to which it just tendered a lucrative contract. The company blames a lack of administrative capacity to enforce overdue bills, which has led to the accumulation of a huge debt to the wholesale supplier.
- The previous mayor sits in prison for taking bribes to allow an unsanctioned trash dump on

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the city limits, while his predecessor finishes a jail term for building himself a garage with funds from the city budget and taking out a “loan” for a car. These are not the main thieves, though—merely the hapless ones.

- Dutiful local citizens trying to obey the law and correctly install and register water meters in their country cottages are quietly told to unscrew the devices and “lose” them, since the local administration has no capacity to collect or process the readings.

Behind the absurdity of these true stories lies the reality of the incoherent state: competing bureaucratic groups, far from working to improve their performance and the well-being of citizens, seek to extract as many resources as possible through the overlap of business and rule-making, particularly via tendering, outsourcing, or downright thievery. In the meantime, people put up with creaking infrastructure and contradictory policies. Their plight is softened by their own small acts of resistance (the smart ones had ignored the rule to install water meters) or the sometimes sympathetic lower-level officials who help them work around the system.

Four parallel processes make the state incoherent. First, while a rhetoric of responsibility and care for the good of the people is an unavoidable part of Russian politics, the state is increasingly withdrawing from its role as social protector, particularly for the needy, of whom there are many in this supposedly middle-income European country.

Second, this abdication of what was the norm in Soviet times—state paternalism—is compounded by a two-decade binge of corrupt self-enrichment by the connected bureaucratic class, which has led to a bifurcation of society. Those with access to the state bureaucracy’s capacity to extract economic rents (whether “legally,” through control of extractive resources, or illicitly, through extortion and skimming) increasingly see themselves as a worthy, superior class above the *hoi polloi*. The sociologist Alena Ledeneva has called this political-economic complex the *sistema*.

Third, when oil prices fell and the global financial crisis hit Russia after 2010, the connected class turned to ordinary people as a resource to be exploited. “People are Russia’s replacement oil” became a social media meme in 2018.

Fourth, given the absence of democratic means to effect change, and the harsh response to protesters, people resort to what the anthropologist

and political scientist James C. Scott has called “infrapolitics”—a kind of hidden form of resistance. This results in ever-greater distancing between rulers and ruled, in a centrifugal process that accelerates the state’s incoherence.

PATERNAL NEGLECT

The first process—the withdrawal of the state from its traditional social role—has been ongoing since the breakup of the Soviet Union, but accelerated after 2000 under Putin’s various governments. From the outside (and especially in the eyes of liberal economists), this looks like a normal process of what academics call “neoliberal governmentality”—the state hollows out some of its responsibilities and delegates power to individuals and markets. Risk and responsibility should be less socialized and more about personal responsibility, argue advocates of this shift.

An example of this in Russia was the so-called benefits monetization program, introduced in 2005, which converted free-at-point-of-use benefits to cash payments, usually significantly lower in value. Among the formerly free or discounted services that this reform restricted were public transport, utilities, and medicines. This led to widespread protests against the symbolic affront to the dignity of what were perceived as socially deserving groups: not just pensioners but war veterans, the disabled, former political prisoners, and people who were involved in the cleanup of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident.

Scholars such as Laura Henry and Julie Hement have pointed out that welfare reforms in the late 2000s took place against the backdrop of a general assumption, supported by official rhetoric, that economic growth would continue to allow living standards to increase, and that “technocratic competence” would help solve Russia’s demographic problems of an aging, sick population and low fertility. However, such reforms have continued in the present decade even as living standards have fallen. The raising of the pension eligibility age in 2018 (to 65 for men and 60 for women, by 2028—an increase of 5 years) is a particularly despised reform; in many regions of European Russia, the majority of men will die before or shortly after retiring. The state pension is barely adequate for subsistence in most regions.

Behind the current episode of state withdrawal lies a long-standing argument for how to diagnose the ills of the Soviet project and its legacy in today’s Russia. We can call this argument the “de-

pendency” or “infantile” thesis: the idea that the overbearing and overwhelming role of the state in every aspect of life created a dependent, passive population lacking dynamism. Making people take responsibility for their own well-being is seen as essential to building citizens capable of competing in a globalized world.

This argument originates in a prevalent view of the entire Soviet period, blaming current ills on its creation of a particular kind of socially stunted individual, ill-equipped to fend for himself: *Homo Sovieticus*. Party functionaries with a monopoly on power operated a highly centralized command economy using scientific principles of planning, based on the idea of quantifiable needs and measurable inputs and outputs. This left people shut out of politics and civil society organizations feeble after communism, even as many Russians continued to view the state as the automatic and natural provider of employment, social goods, and so on.

This “paternalism-as-disease” reading of history sees Russians today as similar to “boomerang” children in their twenties, refusing to leave home and continuing to unrealistically see the state as the deep-pocketed head of a family. Instead of developing their own skills and resources, Russians expect the state to maintain the byzantine system of social benefits and privileges accrued in the Soviet period. And current social protection measures echo Soviet paternalism in certain areas—subsidized mortgages and food vouchers for families with many children, and free public transportation for Muscovite pensioners, just to name a few.

There is a sliver of truth in this argument, but it has more to do with the experience of extreme and widespread socioeconomic trauma in the 1990s. Memories of that time lead Russians to cling to whatever support they can find. Despite the government’s reforms, benefits linked to employment (whether in the public or private sector) are still very important to people, whatever their equivalent monetary value.

For example, when one of my research participants moved from a factory job in an enterprise little changed from Soviet times to a foreign-owned and -operated automobile plant in 2010, his salary increased by nearly 100 percent, but you wouldn’t have guessed his good fortune. Most of his talk revolved around the non-monetary benefits: Would

he have to buy and wash his own overalls? Was the morning coffee free? How many lunch courses did the canteen serve? Was the corporate bus clean and comfortable?

One reading of the multiple causes of the end of the Soviet project is that it collapsed due to its internal contradictions in social policy. The state had implemented universal education, medical coverage, and social security by the 1970s, and people expected living standards to keep rising. The political scientist Linda Cook defined the Soviet social contract as “an implicit exchange between the regime and the populace: citizens remained quiescent and the regime provided them with secure jobs, social services, subsidized housing, and consumer goods.”

However, economic productivity declined, and the social contract failed. In place of universal coverage by social welfare schemes, people increasingly had to rely on their immediate employers for things like decent food in canteens, subsidized housing, and so on. Thirty years later, these perspectives are still relevant. In Russia, economic history tends to rhyme.

Having to depend for survival on informal networks of associates, particularly employment connections, came as a shock to many Russians.

This is well documented in the work of scholars such as Richard Rose, who memorably wrote that to live in Russia in 1994 was to “get by without government.” Similar themes are found in the work of Michael Burawoy, who wrote in 2000 on “household involution”—a retreat to a primitive domestic economy in the face of the collapse of industry and agriculture—and of Melissa Caldwell and Olga Shevchenko, who charted the downward spiral of social mobility experienced even by the Moscow middle class.

The era of economic crises that lasted from the 1980s into the 1990s could be seen as a period in which state incoherence increased. But that doesn’t mean that strong expectations of a social and universalist protector-state went away. On the contrary, the narrative of the 1990s in today’s government propaganda blames the weakened state for the loss of national prestige and stability in that era. According to the official rhetoric, only a strong state can guarantee social rights. Indeed, many people desperately cling to the very modest echoes of that past system.

*Even the most marginalized
and apparently weak people
are not as passive as they seem.*

Two more examples from my research illustrate this:

- A village smallholder whose only child has earned good grades in school does halting research on a borrowed smartphone to look into the few remaining free higher-education courses at the local community college.

- A young couple calculates whether it is worthwhile to have a second child by considering the “maternal capital” grant they will get—the equivalent of a few thousand dollars. Will they qualify for a subsidized mortgage rate and be able to move from a one-room apartment in a run-down dormitory block for migrants to a “two-room” in the nicer block across town?

The problem with the myth that unenterprising and dependent Russians are used to the state picking up the tab is that it ignores reality, both past and present. The Soviet “social contract” was very basic and uneven. People had to make do with their own resources and put up with often terrible conditions in the “universal-coverage” hospitals, schools, and care homes for the elderly and disabled. Moreover, the myth of the “handout Russian” is a distraction from the other, much more meaningful processes at work since 2000.

BUREAUCRACY VS. THE PEOPLE

One such process is the rise of the bureaucratic self-enriching elite class, preventing a more rational and equitable distribution of resources that would allow more targeted social protection. Another is the current punitive and extractive turn due to Russia’s partial disengagement from the global economy, which has led the government to renege on its commitment to basic social rights to compensate for the lack of political rights (another historical rhyme).

The punitively extractive state seeks to milk the population as much as possible with new taxes and fines. It announces loudly that the social state is over already: Forget what the constitution says (that Russia is as much a social state as a capitalist one), the state never asked you to be born or to give birth.

Astonishingly, over the past year, a number of politicians have repeated the latter phrase almost word for word. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev’s words to Crimean pensioners in 2016 are also indicative: “There’s no money, but hang in there.” Since then, the Russian state has aped austerity policies from Western Europe, cutting social, education, and other budgets while pursuing prestige

projects, military spending, and narrow investment in extracting natural gas and exporting it to countries that are unlikely to be long-term customers since they are already reducing their hydrocarbon use.

The sociologist Simon Kordonsky has proposed a model of what he calls the “estates” structure of Russia, echoing the feudal division of society. Any genuine market-economy activity or class formation is overshadowed or stunted by the logic of a resource-based economy organized into a system of estates, or social groups based on hierarchical position. The extractive resources feed the top estate (state functionaries and their connections); everyone else must make do with what is left over or what little the state deems they deserve.

Crucially, service to the state, not labor, determines compensation in this system. Therefore, classes cannot fully emerge. Some 72 million public-sector workers and pensioners, as well as 17 million middle-class professionals and independent entrepreneurs, are seen as being outside the “productive” part of the state. As the economy stagnates, the government and “security” services (around eight million people) siphon off more and more economic rents through webs of corruption.

An even more vampiric system has emerged since 2014, when oil prices fell precipitously and sanctions were imposed on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea. Hydrocarbon rents no longer satisfy the greedy appetite of the already wealthy bureaucratic estate. A terrifying symptom is the increasingly common raiding of private businesses—armed men in balaclavas turn up at some small- or medium-scale enterprise and change its ownership overnight, installing bureaucrats or proxies of the security services.

These trends are producing a bifurcated society, where the bureaucracy seeks ways to enrich itself in the manner of one big state corporation, and everyone else finds themselves in positions of vulnerability or dependency. Political scientists call this kind of system patron-clientelism: personal ties dominate and dictate access to resources and power, while formal rules and institutions have weak purchase.

The Russian scholar Ilya Matveev argues that there is a dualism at the heart of governance: the state has effectively renationalized some key industries since 2004, while continuing with neoliberal reforms for the proverbial 99 percent of the population. Overall, this has led to even more incoherence in the state—poor institutional design,

spiraling costs, and lack of focus and coordination between agencies. Nor has it checked the problem of elite enrichment. For example, the oligarch Roman Abramovich sold his oil company back to the state in 2005 for 130 times the purchase costs.

Incoherence affects not only ordinary people who are subject to falling living standards, but also the bureaucracy itself, which can easily overreach or engage in infighting for resources. Yuri Bykov's daring 2014 film *The Fool* illustrates this tendency. A lowly municipal plumber tries to warn of the impending collapse of a decrepit housing block. Funds for maintenance have been systematically stolen for years. So deep and wide runs the institutionalized system of kickbacks, markups, and other graft that the city's financial controller has the police chief (also part of the system of "collective responsibility") murder the hapless plumber (the "fool" of the title) and her own associates—the city planner and the fire chief. The unfortunate occupants of the decaying building (a metaphor for ordinary Russians) are consigned to their fate.

In the diffuse, corrupt, dysfunctional, and contradictory world of the rule and unrule of law in Russia, words like extortion, bribery, and racketeering lose their meaning. If state actors take assets from you in a way you experience as illegitimate, it is by virtue of their superior command of legal and administrative resources. They have the ability to pass off apparent criminal actions as ordinary accumulation according to the logic of proximity to other, more powerful, state actors.

In *The Fool*, the regional governor requires the mayor to extract a cut from the city budget in order to "pay up" his share. This system, known as *otkat*, is in reality widespread throughout state organizations, from the police to the health service. Connected businessmen can harness their nearness to power and even use law enforcement to violently coerce rivals. No wonder "law" and "enforcement" are wholly incoherent concepts in Russia.

THE NEW OIL

In the past few years, the bureaucracy's appetite for self-enrichment has intensified, symbolized by the phrase "people are the new oil." It is worth putting the current moment in historical context. In feudal Russia, loyal servants of the state were granted the right to "feed" on particular localities,

industries, or trades. In return for managing the extraction and delivery of revenues, they had permission to extract a portion for themselves.

This was different from feudalism as it was experienced in the rest of Europe. In Muscovy, there was no sense of a contractual relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Instead, state expansion and even survival were dictated by a relationship of economic exploitation that bound all in service to the state as sovereign.

Historians have long argued that this situation led to a corporative organization of social strata, similar to the estates system outlined by Kordon-sky. This inhibited the development of an idea of political receptiveness and responsibility, especially since a large part of the population comprised state serfs—people who were the personal property of landowners, or in this case the tsar, without rights. Corporatism also led to a kind of firewalling of different estates: serfs were bound to their villages but self-governing; above them was a tiny, Europeanized, French-speaking elite.

Russia remains a state-nation, not a nation-state. Like those imperial-era elites, the new estate of bureaucrats has grown used to feeding on economic rents—nowadays from hydrocarbon sales—and is addicted to a standard of living

that many North Americans or Western Europeans can only envy. Rather than tighten their belts, they have used their position within the state apparatus to set a punitive course and extract wealth from a population already coping with a decade of stagnant incomes.

At the same time, ordinary people have witnessed a deterioration in public services—health and education, and the entitlements connected to them, were the top concerns of Russians polled in 2018. While the increase in the pension age has caused great discontent, there are more pressing issues, like the price of gasoline, which many believe should be subsidized domestically, given that Russia has 80 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and is the second-largest exporter in the world.

Persistent inflation, likely understated by a factor of three in official statistics, is partly due to sanctions and low oil prices devaluing the ruble. There have also been increases in an array of taxes. Indirect taxes hit the poorest hardest: a value-added tax is levied on utility bills, which already consume around half the income of the poor.

The state is increasingly withdrawing from its role as social protector.

A new target is the largely untaxed income from self-employment, which is usually unregistered. A government declaration of “war on the nannies” was a recent headline. Most people see these informal incomes as necessary to top up their meager primary incomes, and interpret the state’s renewed interest in personal taxation as profoundly unjust.

On top of all this has come a general ratcheting up of fines for minor legal violations. Russian roads are densely covered by enforcement cameras by comparison with most European countries. The Moscow region alone quadrupled its count in 2018 to 1,300 cameras (as many as in the whole of Britain), garnering \$150 million in fines for speeding and other infractions.

Given these mounting burdens, it should come as no surprise that a recent poll showed that around half of Russians cannot financially plan even for the immediate future. Yet in response to muted discontent, those in power find it convenient to wheel out the rhetoric of “self-help,” and explain any misfortune by invoking the myth of the paternalism-addicted masses. Putin recently expressed concern about the tax burden for ordinary people, but this was just his way of playing the paternal leader while his underlings carried out a punitive policy.

EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

Russians are not really so different from any other educated and informed European population. While they might not protest very actively because they know the punitive power of the state, and most see no point in contesting elections rigged to give the ruling elite a monopoly on power at all levels, there are forms of everyday resistance.

Russian resilience and resourcefulness have long compensated for the incoherence of the state. It is even tempting to say that the state is partially exaggerating its own incoherence (and indifference), since it believes that Russians are capable of putting up with pretty much anything and fending for themselves. This is something that no other European state would risk.

In my own research, I have found that in the face of a state abdicating responsibility, people do more than just “make do” by falling back on tried and tested resources, like garden plots and close-

knit networks of mutual aid. They will, given time, not only adapt to dysfunctional systems, but start to inhabit the nooks and crannies—making a virtue of that dysfunction and incoherence. Even the most marginalized and apparently weak people are not as passive as they seem. Over the past three decades, people have gotten used to the incoherent way Russia is governed.

The political scientist and Russia expert Samuel Greene argues that once people are forced to adapt to informal political and economic relations, they actually resist the very institution building and formal bureaucratic ways of states that function in a more “normal” manner. James C. Scott long ago coined the term “infrapolitics” to describe the many aspects of people’s ordinary and unnoticed resistance to the status quo, particularly in colonial contexts or during the era of slavery. But his insights have purchase in contemporary states too. An example from my research is the ubiquity of unregistered and untaxed work in the Russian shadow economy—plumbers, taxi drivers, nannies, and builders all engage in it.

Infrapolitics, Scott says, are nurtured by “hidden transcripts.” The more the “public transcript” (the official narrative) is seen as hypocritical, the more it is likely to generate a rich and “hidden” alternative. When Russians hear cynical official talk about the importance of the development of human capital and productivity while at the same time their leaders tell them that the state owes them nothing, it spurs the creation of counter-discourses against such indignities and injustices.

A wave of memes criticizing the pension reforms was shared via WhatsApp and other encrypted messaging services. A parody of Putin’s 2018 New Year’s address is another example: “Friends, we have had a difficult year, like many before it. And the problem here is of course not the Western sanctions . . . not the ‘lazy people’. . . but the shameless and deceitful authorities.”

One possible state response is to try to shut down the most reliable motor of such infrapolitical speech—the Internet. But as with other authoritarian technological fixes, there will always be hacks, and it’s not even clear whether Chinese-style firewalling is feasible in Russia, since it is too integrated in global information highways. It would be prohibitively expensive and technically

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very difficult to pull off—a bit like rebuilding your house's foundations while still living in it.

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze described the “minor warfare” people wage against the state as “nomadism,” which could well apply to the mobile tactics many ordinary Russians employ. The only option for many is to keep moving and work a hack here and there—siphoning off company fuel for private use, filching some stationery from work, or taking up that oldest form of nomadism—the informal taxi-driving that supports nearly a million families in Russia. Even if technological fixes fill the informational holes through which millions of people disappear into informal economic spaces, new niches and hacks will emerge.

For example, while the Russian state cannot yet link up the database of insured drivers to its impressive network of road cameras, at some point this technical issue will be solved. However, there are already nomadic hacks available to every driver: covering one's license plate with transparent shoe polish, which ensures that a thick layer of dust will immediately adhere to it, or citing the inefficiencies of the Russian postal system to challenge the legality of a fine, claiming that the correspondence was lost. Or another very Russian phe-

nomenon: it's not uncommon for officials tasked with enforcing the state's authority to simultaneously advise ordinary people on how to avoid penalties, out of compassion or solidarity.

The point is not that there is some inflection point where rage converts to rebellion, but rather that such “hidden transcripts” reinforce the logic of nomadic, state-distancing moments—like refusing to register as self-employed, evading a traffic fine, or just having the courage to openly discuss politics for the first time with acquaintances. Each element gives traction to the next. Even though nomadism and infrapolitics work insidiously, they have political significance because they continuously prod at the limits of the publicly sayable and build courage for small personal acts.

The idea of the state as incoherent and uncaring is ingrained in Russian society—a paradox, given the deeply rooted expectation of paternalism. Since Russians are increasingly realistic about the nature of the state, most will continue to rely on the tactics of everyday invisible resistance. By contrast, the recent Moscow protests are a drop in the ocean; only when comfortably-off metropolitans' political interests coalesce with the desire for socioeconomic justice in the broader population will everyday resistance translate into something more. ■