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RUSSIA AND EURASIA

COVID Pressures

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COMING IN NOVEMBER

Pandemic Exposures

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC OF 2020 has already changed the world, and its consequences will continue to be felt for years to come. Now the big question is whether states can adapt to counter the threat while addressing the gaping vulnerabilities that the pandemic has exposed, in order to restore economic and social systems on a more sustainable basis. Another problem is how to rebuild international cooperation after most countries—not least the United States—reverted to an every-man-for-himself scramble for national survival. A November special issue of *Current History* will cover the pandemic's effects across the globe. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **The Pandemic and the Poorest**
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- **Migrants and Refugees on Their Own**
Luisa Feline Freier, Soledad Castillo Jara,
and Marta Luzes, Universidad del Pacifico, Peru
- **Hits and Misses in Scientific Policymaking**
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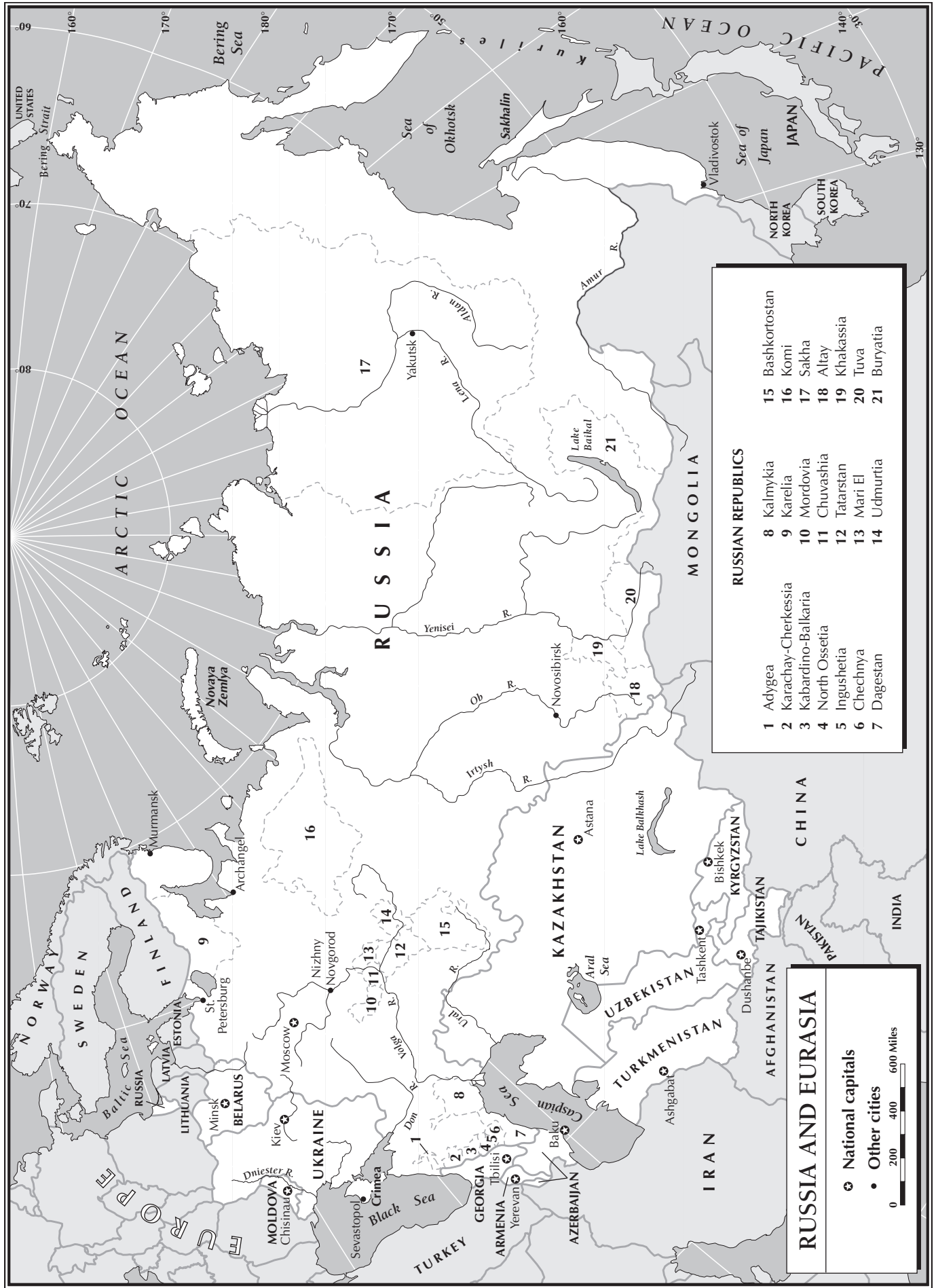
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6	Chechnya	13	Mari El	20	Tuva
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“Although the majority of Russia’s population has some degree of social protection, the most excluded groups . . . have been left to face the pandemic without adequate health services, financial relief, or other basic assistance.”

Can Russia’s Health and Welfare Systems Handle the Pandemic?

LINDA J. COOK AND JUDY TWIGG

Russia recorded its first confirmed case of COVID-19 in early March 2020. Through most of April and May, Russia was second only to the United States in total number of reported cases, though Brazil pushed Russia to third in late June, and India bumped it to fourth in early July. Russia had carried out over 26 million coronavirus tests by late July, and was officially reporting about 800,000 positive cases and just over 13,000 deaths.

The Russian government initially responded to the pandemic by mandating isolation regimes to limit the spread of the virus and adopting a program of measures to mitigate the economic impacts, among other steps. These efforts softened the effects of the crisis for much of the population. However, three groups—labor migrants, informal-sector workers, and rural populations living far from medical facilities—were largely excluded from these mitigation measures.

As in China, the United States, and other countries, Russia’s first COVID-19 cases were concentrated primarily in large urban areas. The burden fell disproportionately on Moscow through the pandemic’s early months. But the caseload then spread rapidly across other parts of the country in mid- to late May.

During the first week of May, more than half of all reported new infections were in Moscow, and well over 60 percent were in the broader capital region. But by the end of June, fewer than 10 percent were in Moscow proper, as hot spots emerged in some poorer regions where health infrastructure was inadequate and infection control measures fell short in an array of contexts, such as hospitals, construction and other work sites, and large social gatherings.

The quality of Russia’s COVID-19 data emerged early in the pandemic as a hot-button political issue. Through March and early April, as reported case numbers surged in Europe and the United States, the number of new cases confirmed daily in Russia seemed implausibly small. Doubts swirled around the coverage and reliability of Russia’s homegrown test kits. As the number of detected cases increased, even more pointed questions arose regarding Russia’s still remarkably low number and rate of reported deaths from COVID-19.

Some observers have speculated that mortality data are being deliberately manipulated to make it appear that the government has handled the pandemic well. At lower levels of the health system, political pressure to avoid sending bad news up the bureaucratic chain is clearly a factor. But it is more likely that the comparatively low fatality rate results from classification rules that differ from global standards.

Russia’s rules are more flexible and highly decentralized, allowing medical professionals to focus on comorbidities that contribute to a death. Even if a patient who had tested positive for coronavirus dies, and the death might not have occurred in the absence of the virus, that death

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can be recorded as due to something other than COVID-19. In other words, standard operating procedures in Russia allow for distinctions between deaths *from* COVID-19 and deaths *with* COVID-19, producing undercounts of the former.

In any event, international reporting (in the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, and other outlets) questioning the accuracy of the death toll prompted the Russian ambassador in Washington to demand a retraction in mid-May. But further analysis comparing the total number of deaths in March, April, and May 2020 with the same months in 2019 led the Russian authorities to adjust their counting rules in early June so that the reported death rate ticked slightly upward.

READY OR NOT?

There are plenty of factors that may have rendered Russia comparatively less vulnerable than other large countries to this pandemic. First of all, Russia has mandatory health insurance that, in principle, guarantees medically necessary treatment free at the point of service for all citizens. Although that insurance system continues to struggle with gaps in coverage and persistent inequities, few stories of financial barriers to testing or treatment for COVID-19 have emerged.

Relatively low internal mobility—especially among Russia's elderly population, which is most susceptible to severe disease requiring hospitalization—lowers risk. Russia's older population also relies less on institutional long-term care than is the case in most industrial societies. Reduction of that risk factor is notable, since 40–45 percent of COVID-19 deaths in the United States have been in nursing homes and other elder care facilities.

Another possible factor is that Russia widely uses the Bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine for tuberculosis. Although the World Health Organization cautions that the evidence is scant, there is speculation that this vaccine offers some protection against the coronavirus.

Last, but not least, the Russian government made good policy decisions early in the pandemic. It closed international borders in March and instituted isolation regimes across most of the country throughout April and most of May.

Other factors, however, have intensified the pandemic's negative impact on Russia. There is

significant variation in health expenditures and health system capacity between urban and rural areas, and in general across Russia's many regions and municipalities, producing wide divergences in access to and quality of care. Shortages of personal protective equipment plagued medical facilities early in the pandemic, causing an alarming number of fatalities among health care workers.

Russians also have disproportionately high rates of chronic underlying health conditions that increase the risk of severe complications from COVID-19, including heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension.

In addition, several vulnerable population groups—such as undocumented migrant workers, the homeless, and residents of communal apartments in St. Petersburg and some other cities—tend to live in crowded conditions with few resources. It is impossible for them to maintain consistent physical distancing from others.

Finally, as the pandemic has dragged on, economic and especially political considerations have overtaken public health imperatives in driving

key elements of decision making. As in other countries, there has been strong pressure to end lockdowns and reopen in order to limit damage to the national economy, but other political considerations specific to Russia

have also influenced the government's response. A national referendum on constitutional amendments, originally planned for April 22, was somewhat hastily rescheduled to run from June 25 to July 1. It was held despite the fact that Moscow and other parts of the country were still falling short of established benchmarks that would indicate that the virus was under control.

The timetable for reopening was accelerated so that in-person voting could occur with maximum turnout. The referendum was important to President Vladimir Putin because it included a clause that would make him eligible to run for two more six-year terms, potentially extending his presidency to 2036. The referendum, which called for an up-or-down vote, also promised increases in pensions and other social benefits, though any raises would be imperiled by a prolonged pandemic-induced recession.

In the government's upper echelons, winning passage of the referendum was clearly a higher priority than caution about public safety. The Kremlin

The system has functioned largely as intended in Moscow and other larger cities.

got the result it wanted. Amid widespread accusations and evidence of fraud, nearly 68 percent of the electorate turned out, and over 78 percent voted in favor of the reforms, according to the official results.

PLANNING PROBLEMS

Although an initial rush of seriously ill COVID-19 patients overwhelmed hospitals in Moscow during the first wave of the pandemic in April and May, expedited construction of new facilities and the repurposing of existing infrastructure quickly caught up to demand in the capital. But outside well-funded and privileged Moscow, the situation is different. Enduring legacies of Soviet health care, coupled with substantial but sometimes erratic and poorly implemented reforms over the subsequent three decades, have left health facilities underprepared for a pandemic like COVID-19 and its possible resurgence due to premature relaxation of restrictions on social gatherings and business activities.

Like the rest of the Soviet economy, health care through most of the twentieth century was structured on principles of input-based planning (success was measured by resources allocated to a problem rather than results). Universal access to care was prioritized, and in this case the achievement justified the boasts of Soviet propaganda: virtually everyone, even in the most remote corners of a nation sprawling across eleven time zones, had free access to some basic level of care. Of course, members of the Communist Party's upper ranks and others with high status enjoyed access to superior facilities, and large cities were better served than outlying and especially rural areas. But even those with privileges suffered from a planning process that prioritized the number of patients treated rather than health outcomes.

This system gave clinic doctors an incentive to limit their work to two primary tasks: signing the sickness certificates that excused ill patients from work, and referring those patients to specialists. Hospital-based specialists met their plan targets by maximizing the number of occupied beds, leading to overcrowding and one of the longest average hospital stays in the world.

Overall financing of health care followed the "residual" principle: the sector got its allocation of funding from what was left after higher-priority industrial sectors like defense and heavy industry had their fill. That explained why health expenditure, at about 3 percent of gross domestic product,

was low by international standards. The scarce resources that the health sector received were often wasted, and quality of care was neglected. Although many Soviet physicians were skilled, compassionate professionals who did their best to ensure their patients' well-being, they did so in spite of, not because of, the system in which they operated.

POST-SOVIET REFORMS

A steady stream of post-Soviet legislation, regulation, and investment has aimed, at least in principle, to end the overemphasis on hospitalization versus primary care, improve quality, and prioritize positive outcomes instead of the quantities of treatment delivered. Nationwide compulsory medical insurance, inaugurated in 1993 to replace the state-run Soviet single-payer system, was designed to create mechanisms for market-based competition. People would be free to choose their health care providers at all levels, either directly or through their choice of health insurance companies that contract with providers.

This system has functioned largely as intended in Moscow and other larger cities. But many other areas lack sufficient numbers of providers, insurance companies, or both, for the competitive incentives to take effect. Meanwhile, private medical facilities have flourished in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and a few other urban centers, adding resources to the health care system while simultaneously increasing inequality of access.

The central and regional governments have made substantial investments in the health sector, beginning in 2006 with the Priority National Health Project, which improved salaries and training for health professionals and increased funding for health infrastructure. These investments ramped up to a new level with Putin's "May decrees" of 2012 and 2018, calling for billions of dollars in new hospital construction, clinic refurbishment, and equipment purchases, among other priorities. The increased spending—now stabilized at around 6.5 percent of GDP annually—has targeted areas where Russia's health and demographic challenges are most severe, including maternal and neonatal care and the treatment of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and other non-communicable diseases. Such investments are a clear response to long-standing and increasing concern at the highest levels of the Russian government about low birth rates, premature mortality (especially among men), and overall population decline.

The central government has also implemented public policies aimed at changing personal behaviors that contribute to poor health, especially the alcohol and tobacco consumption responsible for much of the country's premature mortality from noncommunicable disease. Over the past fifteen years, Russia has rolled out an impressive array of laws and regulations on taxation, sales, consumption, and advertising of alcohol and tobacco, as well as related measures on issues like drunk driving and overall road safety. In conjunction with general improvements in the country's economy, these policies have contributed to meaningful reductions in smoking and drinking, and likely to a remarkable improvement in life expectancy, from age 65 in 2003 to almost 73 in 2018.

Russia's recent experience with control of communicable disease, more immediately applicable to the COVID-19 outbreak, has also produced some successes. Take tuberculosis (TB), for example. The country experienced a surge of cases beginning in the 1990s, but investments in testing, laboratory capacity, infection control for airborne diseases, and treatment regimens, coupled with strong community outreach in some areas, have brought the rate of new cases down by 5–6 percent annually since 2010.

GAPS EXPOSED

Despite such improvements, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed persistent shortcomings in Russia's health care system. The financing reforms aimed at improving the system's efficiency have been implemented unevenly and, at times, counterproductively over the past two decades. An important and necessary byproduct of correcting the Soviet-era imbalance between inpatient and primary care is the downsizing or closure of excess hospital capacity. This kind of politically controversial "rationalization" process ideally is preceded by hospital mapping or other analyses that ensure continued availability of care across locations and income groups.

In Russia, however, the hasty closure of thousands of small, rural health facilities left millions of poor and isolated residents with dramatically reduced access to care. Plans to repurpose some of the excess capacity into long-term care or community centers have seldom led to action. Health care workers have faced similar cuts: in some regions, edicts from above to raise wages have amounted to

unfunded mandates, leading to careless layoffs of some staff in order to free up funds to pay the rest.

As was the case with hospital capacity, Soviet central planning left Russia's health sector overstaffed by comparison with international standards. But rushed and sometimes politically motivated decisions have outweighed rational human-resources policies in too many cases when reductions are implemented. Doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel across the country have taken to the streets to protest both the loss of jobs and the increased workloads for those still employed.

Under emergency pandemic conditions, hospital staffing and bed capacity beyond what is medically necessary, which yesterday would have been viewed as requiring downsizing, may become today's vital surge capacity. As COVID-19 makes its way from Moscow out to the other cities, towns, and rural areas that have borne the brunt of recent infrastructure and staff reductions, hospital systems could find themselves rapidly overwhelmed.

This dynamic has already played out in parts of the North Caucasus, where distrust in government and poor health infrastructure have tragically combined to produce some of the country's largest regional outbreaks. In several such instances across the country, the Kremlin has had to deploy military medical-construction brigades and treatment personnel.

Similarly, the kinds of health infrastructure investments that made sense before the pandemic—geared toward maternal and child health and noncommunicable disease—may not be directly translatable into treatment of a highly communicable, severe acute respiratory infection.

Finally, COVID-19 has highlighted the extent to which Russia's health care system fails to provide outreach and coverage to marginalized populations. Undocumented labor migrants, estimated to number in the millions, are excluded from free access to care. Gaps in services make it difficult for many TB patients—especially the homeless, the currently and formerly incarcerated, and members of other vulnerable groups—to remain in treatment, resulting in one of the highest rates of drug-resistant TB in the world.

The neglect of those infected with or at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS is even more pronounced. The government has refused to legalize methadone or other opioid substitutes and restricts access to

*Rural areas have borne the
brunt of recent infrastructure
and staff reductions.*

clean syringes, leaving injectable drug users—who represent a majority of the country's HIV cases—without access to basic harm reduction services that could prevent the spread of infection. HIV services are similarly restricted for sex workers, men having sex with men, and other key populations.

HIV prevention education and outreach are offered primarily by a small number of courageous nongovernmental organizations that continue to function even in Russia's highly conservative social and political environment, but they are too few and far between to meet more than a small fraction of the total need. Substitution of previously imported pharmaceuticals with domestically produced alternatives that are often less effective has worsened the situation. Largely as a result of these policies, Russia is one of the few countries in the world whose HIV/AIDS epidemic continues to grow.

PREEXISTING CONDITIONS

As the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Russia this March, was the welfare state prepared to cushion the economic shock? From 2000 through 2008, years of strong and steady economic growth, social spending increased greatly and health and other social programs were revived and expanded. Despite a slowdown in growth after the 2008 recession, selected new health policies were funded, pensions were sustained, and child benefits were increased, though improvements were patchy and driven by the Putin administration's priorities—mainly reversing population decline and keeping promises to pensioners.

The economy's exposure to volatile global energy prices was the main source of both rapid growth for almost a decade after 2000 and the more recent years of stagnation. Beginning in 2014, another downturn took hold, driven by declining oil prices and international sanctions in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea.

The positive trend in spending on health care from 2000 to 2013 was reversed. The poverty rate increased. Unemployment insurance was drastically underfunded, with a maximum payout below the officially designated minimum needed for subsistence.

The labor market approached full employment, but wages in most sectors remained low because of poor productivity, which in turn resulted from insufficient investments by the state or mostly oligarchic business owners in modernizing the economy and diversifying away from its dependence on oil and gas exports. Interregional inequalities

in per capita incomes and social expenditures remained high. GDP grew just 1.6 percent in the first quarter of 2020, even before many effects of the coronavirus were felt.

On the positive side, the government had accumulated very little debt and a \$125 billion National Wealth Fund that could be used to stabilize the economy. The administrative architecture for distributing unemployment, family, and pension benefits was in place: most households were receiving social transfers from the state well before 2020. The largest and most populous cities, those that were initially hardest hit by the coronavirus, were also the most prosperous. All these factors should have made the country more resilient in the face of the pandemic.

Beginning in April, the government initiated a range of crisis measures targeting workers, households, small and medium enterprises, and others. While modestly funded by comparison with emergency programs launched by other industrialized nations in response to the pandemic, these measures provided at least some relief for many in Russia's formal economy. But they largely excluded the estimated 15 percent of the labor force working in the informal economy, as well as several million long-term and seasonal labor migrants.

IMMEDIATE IMPACTS

The government closed Russia's borders on March 18 and stopped all nonessential economic activity on March 28. Air traffic was suspended, and major highways in and out of the country were shut down. Schools and universities were closed; students and staff switched to remote learning, which, just as elsewhere, was beset by Internet access limitations and technical failures. Putin announced a paid, nonworking "holiday" week and instructed citizens to self-quarantine. The quarantine period was subsequently extended to June 9 in Moscow and to varying lengths in other regions.

When the government introduced these measures to control the spread of COVID-19, incomes immediately began to fall. According to surveys conducted by the Higher School of Economics in late May, 13.5 percent of respondents reported that they had lost their entire income, while nearly one-third reported a significant reduction. In total, 61 percent reported that their earnings were lower than before the coronavirus outbreak.

While 30–40 percent of respondents reported that they continued to work between early April and

late May, almost 10 percent had lost their jobs. An additional 13 percent went on unpaid leave or did not know how they would be compensated for their time in self-isolation. The official unemployment rate increased to a little over 6 percent in May. From the beginning of the pandemic, private consumption dropped sharply, and the service sector suffered large revenue losses.

Official statistics as well as survey research show that most Russians were poorly prepared to cope with this economic shock. In the spring of 2020, 13.5 percent of the population, almost 20 million people, were officially classified as poor, with incomes below the minimum subsistence level. Forty percent considered themselves poor.

Even a majority of the nonpoor had limited financial reserves. More than 50 percent of those surveyed said that they could not cope with unexpected expenses. Another survey, commissioned by the insurance company Rosgosstrakh Life and Ot-kritie Bank, showed that 63.6 percent of Russians had no savings at all.

Even as COVID-19 brought another steep decline in oil prices and instability in financial markets, the government moved quickly to put in place emergency measures designed to support households and businesses. Initially these included extra pay for notoriously underpaid medical staff and sick leave pay for those affected by the virus. The very low unemployment benefit was increased and extended, as were child benefits. Mortgage loans and household utility and rent payments were deferred. (Although part of the population continues to live in apartments acquired at nominal cost when the Soviet Union collapsed, all must pay for utilities and maintenance, and by this point many pay market rents to private owners, or have taken out mortgage loans.)

Small and medium-sized enterprises were granted a range of tax and loan deferrals and holidays, loan restructuring, and a temporary 50-percent reduction in wage-tax payments. They also received grants, subsidies, and forgivable loans to cover their employees' minimum wages for several months, as long as they maintained 90 percent of their workforces. Interest rates were reduced. Tariffs on some imported pharmaceuticals were eliminated and other restrictions eased in an effort to improve the supply of medications for patients infected with COVID-19.

Putin called on regional governments to preserve their populations' jobs and incomes, putting much of the responsibility for dealing with the crisis on governors. But their economic capacity to supplement the federal measures varies greatly, reinforcing interregional inequality.

The crisis measures at both the federal and regional levels were far from comprehensive, amounting to only about 3 percent of GDP by April. This was low relative to emergency measures in the advanced economies, though at par with other middle-income countries at similar levels of GDP per capita. But Russian economists and business owners called for a more comprehensive response.

FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Large groups were mostly excluded from these relief measures. First were the estimated 15 percent of Russians who worked informally, off the books. Lacking employment protections or social security even in normal times, they were not eligible for emergency benefits such as wage support or unemployment payments. As Russian citizens, they were eligible for state-funded medical insurance

and should have received family and child benefits, which afforded minimal support at best.

Labor migrants faced an even more difficult situation. In Russia, as in other countries, both long-term and seasonal migrant workers comprised the group most fully excluded from any type of social welfare.

Russia annually hosts several million migrant workers, most of whom come from Central Asia, along with smaller numbers from other countries, including China. Some have regularized their status, but the majority remain unregistered and overlooked by the state.

Migrant workers are at elevated risk of exposure to the virus because they often live and work in crowded conditions and have limited access to public health care. Many lost their jobs as construction sites and factories closed, and they were ineligible for the government's economic and health aid. When transport in and out of Russia was suspended, hundreds were trapped at airports or at closed border crossings, unable either to remain and work or to return home.

In late March, just as the effects of the pandemic began to be felt, hundreds of thousands of young seasonal labor migrants, primarily in Central Asia,

Most households were receiving social transfers from the state well before 2020.

were preparing to return to Russia for work in construction and agriculture. Closed borders meant loss of crucial income for many vulnerable families, as well as shortages of labor needed to harvest crops.

Over the previous two decades, some Central Asian states had become dependent on migrants' remittances for 30–50 percent of GDP. Russia's economic crisis reverberated through these countries and their populations. Many families relied on remittances from relatives who migrated to Russia for work. Loss of this income resulted in extreme financial hardship.

The Russian government began easing its pandemic lockdowns in mid-May. By that time the number of new cases was declining but still substantial. Moscow, the epicenter of the country's outbreak, canceled all remaining restrictions on movement on June 9.

Supplementing its earlier measures, the government announced a 5 trillion ruble National Economic Recovery Plan—equal to 5 percent of GDP, but still much smaller than recovery programs amounting to 10–30 percent of GDP in the United States and Europe—to usher the economy through reopening and a hoped-for return to growth in 2020–21.

The recovery is likely to be complicated by the relief measures themselves. Some that were directed to small and medium-sized businesses merely deferred loan repayments, but did not forgive them. Reserves in pension and health insurance funds are dwindling because of the halving of employers' wage taxes, another relief measure for businesses. A study by experts at the Higher School of Economics' Social Policy Institute predicted further declines in payments to social funds because of expected

cuts in salaries, rising unemployment, and falling real incomes. Yet demands on these funds are likely to continue increasing.

Russia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlights both strengths and weaknesses of its health and welfare systems. The Soviet legacy of universal health care proved an asset in handling the pandemic, as did the experience gained in recent successful public health campaigns to slow the spread of tuberculosis. But efforts to control the coronavirus have been undercut by unevenly distributed medical facilities and poorly implemented Putin-era reforms that worsened inequalities, leaving some populations virtually without access to health care.

The government responded to the economic impact of its lockdown with a broad package of relief measures directed to households and businesses. Although its National Economic Recovery Plan is comparable to counterparts in other middle-income countries, it may prove inadequate. In surveys, two-thirds of Russians report having limited savings to see them through a crisis.

The near-poverty of so many Russian households is a consequence of a dysfunctional economic system that keeps productivity low, maintains high levels of inequality, and is too dependent on energy markets that are severely depressed by the global economic slowdown. Although the majority of Russia's population has some degree of social protection, the most excluded groups—rural populations, informal sector workers, labor migrants (and the families and countries that rely on their remittances), the homeless, and the incarcerated—have been left to face the pandemic without adequate health services, financial relief, or other basic assistance. ■

“Normalized precarity should no longer be seen as something extraordinary, but rather as a way of life for millions of Central Asian migrants in Russia in the COVID-19 era.”

Precarious Times for Central Asian Migrants in Russia

SHERZOD ERALIEV AND RUSTAMJON URINBOYEV

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immediate and unprecedented impact on the everyday lives of Central Asian migrant workers in Russia. But their working and living conditions were dire well before the pandemic, due to ever-tightening immigration rules, widespread police corruption, xenophobia, and a struggling economy.

In the course of our extensive fieldwork in Russia, we have observed how Russia's economic decline since 2014 has affected labor migration from Central Asia, and how migrants have coped. The pandemic has added a new array of uncertainties and challenges, including deepening anti-migrant sentiment.

Traditionally regarded as a country of emigration, Russia has become one of the world's main migration magnets since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is now the fourth-largest recipient of migrants in the world, after the United States, Germany, and Saudi Arabia. Russia's visa-free entry for almost all citizens of other post-Soviet countries (except the Baltic states, Turkmenistan, and Georgia), higher living standards, relatively better economic opportunities, and aging population have provided fertile ground for large-scale migratory flows from across the former Soviet Union.

For the past two decades, labor mobility between Central Asia and Russia has become well established and resilient in spite of economic crises and tightened immigration laws. But times have been hard since Western countries imposed

sanctions on Russia following its 2014 annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine. Coming in the wake of a substantial devaluation of the ruble and a drop in the price of oil (the country's main source of export revenue), the sanctions tipped Russia into a recession. For many migrants, the situation was worsened by the government's increasingly punitive measures to curb undocumented migration.

Experts estimate the total number of migrants in Russia at six to seven million. The majority come from three Central Asian countries: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In 2019, there were more than two million Uzbeks, over one million Tajiks, and about 700,000 Kyrgyz nationals in Russia. Since Kyrgyzstan became a member of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in mid-2015, its citizens, in theory, have the same labor rights as the local Russian population—though Kyrgyz still face widespread violations of those rights as well as police extortion. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan do not belong to the bloc.

Migrant workers in Russia are mainly engaged in low-paid jobs, doing unskilled heavy labor. Many migrants are seasonal workers: they typically arrive in Russia in the spring, when economic activity picks up and more jobs are available at construction sites and on farms. They return to their home countries in late autumn, before coming back again in spring the next year.

While men typically find jobs in the construction, transportation, and agricultural sectors, women are predominantly employed in the retail trade (supermarkets and grocery stores, for example), catering, and domestic and cleaning services. Men still comprise a large majority of migrants, but the number of female migrants, especially from Kyrgyzstan, has increased considerably in recent years.

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The population of Central Asian migrant workers in Russia declined during the economic crisis that began in 2014, as the cost of entry into the official labor market increased. In 2015, the numbers of Uzbek and Tajik workers in Russia fell by 22.2 percent and 15.6 percent, respectively. The number of Kyrgyz workers increased by 5.4 percent over the same period, but that was likely a result of employment restrictions easing due to Kyrgyzstan's membership in the EEU.

In 2013, remittances from Russia—money sent home by migrants—totaled \$7.8 billion to Uzbekistan, \$3.9 billion to Tajikistan, and \$2.1 billion to Kyrgyzstan. By 2015, those figures dropped by almost half for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and by one-third for Kyrgyzstan.

A small number of migrants who returned home changed their preferred destinations from Russia to alternative migration hubs such as Turkey and Kazakhstan. (Central Asians can enter both Kazakhstan and Turkey without a visa.) However, as Russia's economic outlook started to improve and the Turkish and Kazakh economies experienced turbulence of their own, Central Asian migrants soon returned to Russia, where huge construction projects such as building infrastructure for soccer's 2018 World Cup created tens of thousands of jobs for migrants.

The COVID-19 pandemic has once more revealed the vulnerable position of migrants in Russia. Thousands, if not tens of thousands, have lost their jobs. Others have been forced to work in precarious conditions, putting their health at risk.

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS

Although Central Asian migrants enter Russia legally, they often fail to comply with immigration laws and become undocumented. Formal rules and requirements for residency and employment of foreign citizens are complex and subject to constant change, making it nearly impossible for migrant workers to operate legally in the Russian labor market. Faced with inconsistent enforcement of immigration laws, many Central Asians are compelled to find jobs in the shadow economy, where they can get by without documents.

Alarmed by the growing undocumented migrant labor force, Russian authorities further tightened the laws, strengthened border infrastructure, and introduced highly punitive enforcement provisions.

Between 2012 and 2015, more than 50 laws and regulations aimed at reducing undocumented migration were amended to add administrative and criminal penalties for violations. Among these, an outright ban on reentry for some migrants (first introduced in 2013 and subsequently revised in 2014–15) was the most severe sanction that could be imposed on foreign citizens who had committed two or more administrative offenses within a three-year period.

Another new law, known as the 90–180 rule, took effect in January 2014, stipulating that foreigners can stay in Russia for only 90 days within any 180-day period. Migrants who overstay are subsequently banned from entering Russia for three, five, or ten years, depending on the length of their overstay. These restrictions made it impossible for migrants to continue the common practice of crossing the border every three months in order to reenter and start a new grace period.

An additional legislative change stripped the Federal Migration Service of its status as an independent government agency. It was merged into the Ministry of Internal Affairs in early 2016, reflecting a shift toward a policing approach to migration management. Migration officials became de facto police officers without uniforms.

No evidence indicates that these measures produced the desired effect. There was a small drop in the number of migrants, but that was more a result of Russia's recession in the fall of 2014 than a demonstration of the effectiveness of harsher enforcement. In fact, the more restrictive immigration laws and policies led to the proliferation of ambiguous legal statuses and illegal-document schemes. Migrants learned to sidestep restrictions by buying “new passports” or “clean fake” immigration papers (counterfeits almost impossible to detect) from the numerous “legalizing firms” operating in Russia.

As they adapted to the tighter restrictions, migrants also began limiting their return trips home, planning one long stay in Russia during which they would try to earn as much as possible, knowing that they might not be allowed to reenter if they left the country. This trend showed up in the reduced frequency of border crossings. Many migrants began overstaying in Russia, increasing the share of undocumented foreigners in the labor market.

Migrants have become an indispensable part of the Russian labor market.

Russian authorities estimated that there were around two million undocumented migrants in the country by the end of 2018. Rather than reducing their numbers, the hardened legal restrictions and punitive measures were contributing to the growth of undocumented migration.

PATENT PENDING

One of the most important changes in the Russian migration regime over the past five years has been the introduction of a new work permit system. In 2015, Russia abolished the previous system of work permit quotas for citizens from the visa-free post-Soviet countries and introduced new permits, known as patents, that cover all forms of migrant employment.

Until then, migrants could use a patent only for entering into employment agreements with individual citizens for personal, household, or other similar services. Under the new system, as of January 1, 2015, patents became the main channel for legal employment for all foreign workers entering Russia under the visa-free regime.

In order to obtain a patent, migrants must meet numerous requirements within 30 days of their arrival. These include obtaining a migration card, a temporary residence registration, and certificates attesting to their health and knowledge of the Russian language and Russian history and law. They must also pay a monthly patent fee. A migrant needs at least 25,000 rubles (roughly \$350) in order to meet these initial requirements.

Rather than making it easier to navigate the legalization process, the new patent system introduced more complicated bureaucratic procedures and high fees that pushed migrants further into the shadow economy. Some resort to various semi-legal and illegal practices, such as buying fake documents. Given these effects, migration scholars and experts often characterize the recent reforms to the Russian migration regime as taking one step forward, two steps back.

EVERYDAY XENOPHOBIA

Another challenge faced by Central Asian migrants in Russia is the racism they experience in everyday situations across all social settings, including their interactions with government officials, police officers, and border guards.

Expressions of anti-migrant sentiment have been normalized in contemporary Russia's public discourse. The prevalence of such hostility is exemplified by the depiction of Central Asian

migrants as "illegals" or *gastarbaitery* (an adaptation of the German word for "guest worker," which has been given a negative connotation in the Russian context). These racist terms are widely used in the Russian media as well as among ordinary Russian citizens.

In everyday life in Russia, a migrant is defined as a person who does not look Russian, regardless of his or her legal status, citizenship, or period of residence. Migrants are also assumed to be eager to commit crimes. Such racist tropes are reinforced by the media, shaping public opinion and intensifying xenophobic attitudes toward migrants.

The coverage of Central Asian migrants before and after the uprising in Ukraine illustrates this typical media portrayal of migrants as public enemies. Opinion polls in October 2013 showed xenophobia against migrants in Russia at a record high: 73 percent of respondents held the view that the government should restrict the influx of Central Asian migrants and expel "illegals" from the country. Although negative attitudes toward migrants had been common in recent years, the increase in late 2013 was mostly a result of the Moscow mayoral election held during the summer. Candidates competed to deliver the harshest anti-migrant rhetoric. The campaign was widely covered by nationwide television channels, stoking anti-migrant sentiment.

But in 2014, as events in Ukraine unfolded and tension between Russia and the West escalated, the Russian media shifted toward anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western rhetoric. By the summer of 2015, the same survey that had previously recorded high levels of xenophobia found that only 43 percent of respondents thought that Central Asian migrants should be barred from entering Russia. That was a drop of 30 percentage points in two years.

However, recent opinion polls have again recorded rising levels of xenophobia. In September 2019, 72 percent of respondents had an unwelcoming attitude toward migrants in Russia. The growing anti-migrant rhetoric in the Russian media, partly in response to the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015–16, might explain this trend.

Along with everyday xenophobia and frequent police abuse, migrant workers are often victims of fraud perpetrated by employers or by intermediaries who offer help with finding a job, procuring documents, or otherwise navigating the system. All this contributes to a constant sense of insecurity that many migrants experience in their everyday lives as they contend with the pervasive

threats of discrimination, exploitation, abuse, and deportation.

There is little hope of support from the Russian government. Central Asian migrant workers are simultaneously visible and invisible to the state. It denies migrants access to welfare and an opportunity to voice their concerns, while it exploits their cheap labor. Migrants have become an indispensable part of the Russian labor market.

Migrants put up with these hardships because their earnings in Russia are a vital source of income for impoverished households back in their home countries. Many migrants cling to the illusion that their precarious status is temporary—that after saving enough to buy a house or a car, pay off debt, or celebrate a wedding, they will no longer have to come to Russia for work. In reality, many of them keep returning, and tolerate daily mistreatment on the assumption that their situation is temporary and they will eventually return home for good. They exist in a condition of normalized precarity.

Nonetheless, migrants have informal resources to draw on. Seeking to minimize risks and adapt to their precarious environment, they come to rely on informal safety nets and infrastructures found within many migrant communities. These services have contributed to the development of “parallel communities” in which migrants can seek jobs, accommodation, leisure activities, advice, and other assistance.

Such informal resources are especially helpful for socializing with people from one’s home country, or even for quickly collecting money among migrants to finance the repatriation of a deceased countryman’s body. Informal channels and networks allow mobility between Russia and Central Asia to remain resilient despite the disruptions caused by economic crises and restrictive immigration laws and policies.

POLITICAL PAWNS

As some scholars have noted, inconsistencies in Russia’s immigration laws may be a result of the conflicting needs and objectives of different interest groups. Liberals and business elites view labor migration as an inevitable and even necessary tool to fill economic and demographic gaps. But *siloviks* (officials from the military or security establishment) and nationalists see migration as a dangerous

and undesirable phenomenon—a security and cultural threat—and demand strict controls. Due to these clashing elite views, seemingly liberal immigration rules coexist with restrictive and punitive measures.

Other scholars see these ambiguities in migration governance as serving the purpose of keeping the number of documented migrants low so that Russian officials can strategically manipulate anti-migrant sentiment to gain popular support. Officials often divide immigrants into desirable and undesirable categories based on their cultural and racial backgrounds.

In December 2019, answering a journalist’s question at a press conference, President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia needs to take a selective approach in its immigration policies. Those “who know Russian culture and speak the language”—in other words, people from Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova—are welcome, Putin declared. But he added that it is difficult for Central Asian migrants to adapt to Russian society. Putin called for restricting migration from Central Asia to avoid causing “irritation among local residents when they are faced with disrespect for our culture and history.”

None of this should give the impression that migrants need Russia but Russia does not need migrants. For domestic political purposes, migration is depicted as a dangerous force that must be contained and controlled. But in fact, Russia needs migrant workers not only because they provide cheap labor, but also because they partly compensate for the country’s shrinking population. Migration also gives Moscow leverage to influence neighboring post-Soviet countries that are economically dependent on the Russian labor market.

Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined the Russian-led EEU, which promises free flows of capital, goods, services, and labor among member countries, in hopes that their migrant citizens would face fewer bureaucratic hurdles and lower costs of entry into the Russian labor market. This regional influence makes the EEU one of Russia’s most important geopolitical projects in its confrontation with the West.

To take another example of the regional politics of migration, when the Russian military’s lease of a base in Tajikistan was about to expire in 2012, one of the concessions that Moscow was willing to grant in exchange for a 30-year extension of the

Central Asian migrants are forced to find jobs in the shadow economy.

was an amnesty for “illegal” Tajik migrants. The two governments also struck an agreement on easing travel and work restrictions for Tajik nationals in Russia.

Russia has also routinely used citizenship as a means of gaining leverage in regional geopolitics. One of the justifications cited by Moscow for its involvement in territorial conflicts with Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine has been the large number of people in disputed regions of those countries—Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk—who had received Russian citizenship well before the fighting broke out. Putin has claimed a duty to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers outside the motherland. But the distribution of Russian passports to residents of these areas has often coincided with an intensification of conflict.

Citizenship is not just a geopolitical tool for Moscow. Population aging and a shrinking labor force have been a top concern for Russian authorities. In the past three decades, the population shrank by 3.6 million despite the inflow of Russian speakers from other post-Soviet countries in the 1990s and the naturalization of several million new citizens in recent years.

Russia has been easing naturalization rules for more than a decade. In 2018, nearly 270,000 foreigners obtained Russian citizenship. In 2019, the number jumped to almost 500,000. Approximately 300,000 of these new citizens are former Ukrainians; 167,000 of the new passports were issued in Russia’s Rostov region, which borders separatist-held areas in eastern Ukraine.

In April 2020, Russia adopted a new law that simplifies the rules for obtaining Russian citizenship. Among other changes, it allows naturalized citizens to retain their original nationality. The previous requirement that applicants give up their citizenship in their home countries deterred many who had resided in Russia for a long period from applying. This kept tens of thousands of migrants with residence permits in limbo, allowing them to continue living and working in Russia but with no viable path to citizenship unless they were willing to cut ties with their home countries (some of which, such as Uzbekistan, prohibit dual citizenship).

Obtaining Russian citizenship lowers the cost of entry into the labor market and provides more secure status. The economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will likely increase competition for jobs (including with local Russians),

which in turn will encourage more migrants who have lived in Russia for several years to apply for Russian citizenship.

PANDEMIC SHOCK

The pandemic caught migrant workers in Russia by surprise. As the number of confirmed cases started to soar, the government imposed lockdown measures to contain the virus. On March 18, Russia barred entry for all foreigners, a restriction that remained in place through the spring and into the summer.

Regional authorities were given autonomy to decide how far to go in ordering temporary closures. Since lockdown policies differed from region to region, the scale of job losses among migrants also varied.

In Moscow, the leading destination for migrants, fairly strict lockdown measures were imposed. As many businesses suspended their activities, especially in the service and retail trade sectors, Central Asian migrants were first in line to lose their jobs. Although authorities urged companies not to fire staff during the crisis, few businesses could afford to retain their Russian employees, let alone migrant workers. Tax holidays and incentives offered by the government did little to alleviate most firms’ losses. At best, migrants were put on unpaid leave without any guarantee of returning to the same job.

According to Russian immigration rules, migrants must work in the jurisdiction where they obtain their work permits. A migrant who loses a job in Moscow and finds another in a different province has to start over with the process of applying for a new patent. This rule was especially problematic during the lockdown. Many jobless migrants were stuck indoors in large cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg at a time when there was a growing demand for labor in southern regions as spring arrived and the season for agricultural work began.

Job losses among migrants also differed by sector. While most migrants who had been employed in the service and trade sectors had to stay indoors without jobs, construction laborers were allowed to return to work after just a few weeks of confinement. This was partly due to concerns expressed by big businesses over a potential shortage of cheap labor and the suspension of construction projects.

However, the main reason for allowing migrants to return to construction sites was probably the mid-April detection of coronavirus infections at a dormitory housing about 470 migrants outside

St. Petersburg. The number of confirmed infections at the dorm eventually reached 123. Similar mass outbreaks among migrants also occurred in dormitories in the regions of Murmansk, where 125 were infected, and Bashkortostan, where 68 tested positive. Authorities likely realized that locking down large numbers of migrants might lead to more outbreaks.

Putin urged provincial governors to let migrants return to construction sites. On April 18, he signed a decree allowing migrants to work without permits from March 15 to June 15. Their stays in Russia would be automatically prolonged without the risk of fines or deportation.

Even so, migrants have become one of the most vulnerable social groups in Russia during the pandemic. Many have lost their jobs, while others have been compelled to work on construction sites and in housecleaning and other domestic services, risking their health. If they test positive for COVID-19, migrants have minimal access to health care services.

Central Asian governments organized several charter flights to repatriate their most vulnerable citizens, but tens of thousands were still waiting to return home. Charities and local activists delivered food to those who lost their jobs and were confined inside without any means to feed themselves. Most migrants send almost all of their earnings home to their families, keeping only enough to cover their own basic subsistence costs. Many of them soon ran out of money during the lockdown.

Migrants who kept their jobs and had to commute amid the lockdown were often stopped by police, who checked their identification and travel permits. Migrant rights activists have reported that even when migrants produced all their documents, police officers often accused them of breaching the lockdown rules. In most cases, they were released after paying a bribe.

The collapse of oil prices just before the lockdown measures took effect worsened Russia's economic crisis. Many Russians have lost their jobs, accelerating a long-term decline in living standards. As the unemployment rate increased sharply, Russian authorities started to adopt new rules to ensure that the local population would have priority for employment in skilled jobs.

When competition for scarce jobs intensifies, populists may step up their efforts to stir up

xenophobia among the public. Some Russian media outlets have depicted migrants as so desperate to find food that they are prepared to do anything, even resort to crime.

Job losses and reduced earnings among migrants have already resulted in a decline in the remittances they send to their home countries. Central Asian economies have suffered from national lockdown measures and the closure of nonessential businesses. Dwindling intakes of remittances and the weakening of the Russian economy—one of the largest trade partners for Central Asian countries—threaten to cause more severe damage.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the poorest countries in the region, will suffer the most. In 2018, migrant remittances amounted to 33 percent of gross domestic product in Kyrgyzstan and 29 percent in Tajikistan. More than \$8 billion in remittances was sent to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan in 2019. In June 2020, reports indicated that remittances to Central Asian countries in March and April fell by nearly half from the same period the previous year.

Seasonal migrants across Central Asia now find themselves in a difficult situation. They cannot find jobs at home, and they cannot travel to Russia because the borders remain closed. Even if the borders open in the coming months, it will be hard to find jobs in Russia. The labor market is expected to stay shrunken for an extended period after the pandemic.

Unlike the Russian economic crises of 2008–9 and 2014–15, when the number of migrants fell sharply but gradually recovered over the next several years, it will take longer for the situation to normalize after the pandemic. The calamity overtook Russia at a time when its economy was already shrinking. Oil prices and the ruble have plummeted; supply and demand chains have ruptured. Amid these economic blows, Russian society faces deepening political repression.

In the short term, as employers try to minimize their costs by hiring employees unofficially to avoid taxes, more and more migrants will be pushed into the shadow economy, increasing the risks of exploitation and deportation. Normalized precarity should no longer be seen as something extraordinary, but rather as a way of life for millions of Central Asian migrants in Russia in the COVID-19 era. ■

Punitive measures contributed to the growth of undocumented migration.

“In the past decade, China has become the most important economic actor in this generally impoverished region. . . .”

The Belt and Road Initiative’s Central Asian Contradictions

CATHERINE OWEN

On a chilly but snowless day in January 2019, around 300 men gathered on Bishkek’s central Ala-Too Square to demand an end to a perceived rise in Chinese migration to Kyrgyzstan. The crowd whistled and cheered as impassioned speeches against growing Chinese influence were delivered by the organizers, members of the conservative-nationalist group Kyrk Choro. In an attempt to quell the protest, the deputy chairman of the State Migration Service took the stage to outline proposed legislation addressing the issue. When scuffles broke out following the rally, police moved in and detained 21 people.

This was just the latest in a string of protests against China’s growing influence in the small Central Asian country. But such events are not limited to Kyrgyzstan. Nine months later, in its much bigger neighbor Kazakhstan, demonstrations against Chinese expansionism broke out in major cities. According to official figures, 57 people were arrested. Kazakhstan is no stranger to anti-China protests: in 2016, nationwide demonstrations erupted against proposed changes to the Land Code that would have enabled foreigners to rent Kazakh land for up to 25 years. In an uncharacteristic move, the authorities bowed to public pressure, and the changes were never enacted.

Is this groundswell of discontent the result of a combination of nationalist posturing and fear of the unknown? Or are the polities of Central Asia really at risk from China?

In the past decade, China has become the most important economic actor in this generally impoverished region, making large investments in infrastructure. Beijing has rebranded its growing

engagement in Central Asia as part of its global foreign policy project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For the nations of the region, greater cooperation with China promises many benefits. But the BRI’s fragmentary and haphazard implementation suggests that these potential boons could be squandered.

The BRI was first announced in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping in a speech at Nazarbayev University in the Kazakh capital of Astana (since renamed Nursultan). The aim is to build a vast network of transportation, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure to connect Chinese manufacturers with consumer markets in Western Europe.

The BRI comprises two core strands: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which traverses the Eurasian continent, and the Maritime Silk Road, which runs south through the Strait of Malacca, around the southern tip of India, across the Red Sea, and through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean. Central Asia was initially seen as the site for BRI’s “hard” infrastructure, such as energy pipelines and rail networks, but is now participating in the expansion of digital infrastructure like surveillance technology, health apps, and 5G wireless communications systems. China’s total investment exceeds \$100 billion.

According to Chinese government figures, 138 countries to date, accounting for around a third of the global population, have signed memoranda of understanding with Beijing regarding BRI. This vast investment drive has produced huge benefits for Chinese businesses. Seven of the world’s ten largest construction corporations measured by revenue are headquartered in China; two of the top ten telecommunications companies are Chinese; and Sinopec, China’s state-owned oil and gas corporation, is the most profitable energy company in the world.

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Central Asia, by contrast, remains a poorly connected region. Due to its Soviet legacy, all oil and gas pipelines, as well as communications, air, and rail infrastructure, ran solely to Russia. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, the newly independent states had no direct links to world markets. Even thirty years later, the Central Asian economies—with the exception of Kazakhstan—are still some of the least diversified in the world.

Investment in infrastructure is desperately needed in the region; a 2018 United Nations report found that only 38 percent of roads in Kyrgyzstan are tarmacked. Low economic growth and high unemployment rates prompt many Central Asians to seek work abroad, mostly in Russia. Emigrants constitute 10 to 20 percent of the working population in countries across the region. Remittances sent home by those migrants account for 52 percent of gross domestic product in Tajikistan and 34 percent in Kyrgyzstan, among the highest levels in the world.

The question is whether the BRI will deliver the benefits Central Asia so clearly needs, or whether it is designed to primarily serve China's own interests. Answering this requires first taking a closer look at the nature of the China-led vision of international cooperation embodied in the BRI.

*Central Asia is one of the most
poorly connected regions
of the world.*

ALTERNATIVE MODEL?

Unlike the multilateralism underpinning the Western-led liberal international order, Chinese foreign policy is structured on its preference for bilateral relations. China seeks individually negotiated agreements with one other party rather than participation in collective organizations. When China does engage with groups of other states, it tends to do so bilaterally through specially created vehicles, such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation and the 17+1 Forum in Eastern Europe.

This commitment to bilateralism allows Chinese actors to negotiate discrete, flexible agreements with a variety of states, corporations, and agencies, promoting Chinese products and values according to the specific context. It is exemplified in the way the BRI has expanded across the globe. Yet such an approach lacks coordination, transparency, and accountability, preventing collective oversight of Chinese activities—which may be causing the BRI's image problem in countries along its route.

In the English-language scholarly literature, three strands of thought have emerged on the BRI. The first emphasizes China's national political economy, the second focuses on global geopolitics and the balance of power, and the third foregrounds nonstate, subnational, and transnational actors.

Analysts in the first group view the BRI chiefly as a response to a crisis in China's state-led capitalist system: a \$586 billion rescue package for cash-strapped provinces following the 2007–8 global financial crisis led to overcapacity in the manufacturing, construction, and energy sectors. The BRI, in this view, is primarily an economic project, a “spatial fix” for Chinese capitalism that enables China to funnel its excess capital and production capacity abroad.

The second perspective notes that China and other developing countries have long been dissatisfied with the imbalance of power across the existing framework of intergovernmental institutions, which favors Western countries despite their relative decline in global influence. It proposes that

the BRI is intended to be an alternative model of global order, a bid to shift both economic and normative power away from the West. Unlike Western-led institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank,

China typically offers loan packages free of conditions that require implementation of a “good governance” agenda or strict social and environmental protections. Its flexible repayment packages are often secured with commodities. The BRI is increasing Chinese lending to countries that do not receive loans from such institutions, and is reshaping the global order in the process.

The third perspective emphasizes the inherently fragmentary and ungovernable nature of BRI, which it depicts as a decentralized network of subnational economic and political actors. In this view, Chinese governmental discourse on BRI is a post hoc attempt to lend coherence to the localized practices of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and subnational governments that operate beyond the purview of Beijing. The main driver of BRI is not the Chinese state implementing a coordinated and premeditated strategy in the national interest. Rather, the BRI is being steered by provincial government administrations, partially internationalized SOEs, and the flows of global capital.

While all three perspectives reflect truths about the nature of the BRI, I aim to flesh out the third view by highlighting the panoply of Chinese actors involved in the initiative, including lenders, SOEs, and provincial governments—and by exploring the projects themselves, many of which were begun long before the BRI was articulated. A variety of Chinese actors negotiate bespoke agreements with overseas counterparts that are often retrospectively labeled as part of the BRI.

In Central Asia, this lack of central oversight combined with an absence of mechanisms promoting transparency and accountability is fueling elite corruption and popular discontent. It is a trend that could foment political instability and ultimately prove detrimental to the BRI project.

RESHAPING A REGION

Chinese official discourse on BRI has given prime importance to the Eurasian region, drawing on the imagery of the ancient Silk Road, where traders from both East and West crossed paths on the Central Asian steppe. The boost to economic activity promised by the BRI has the potential to radically reshape Central Asia. The Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, which tracks all projects enacted under the auspices of the BRI, has identified 93 to date in Central Asia that are either fully or partly funded by Chinese financial institutions. These include the Five Nations Railway Project connecting China and Iran across Central Asia, numerous road improvement projects, and a plethora of mines, oil refineries, and power stations.

Special economic zones, which aim to attract foreign direct investment by offering lower taxes and looser regulations, are emerging across the region, modeled on the scheme that transformed the Chinese city of Shenzhen from a humble fishing village into a key node of the global economy. The most important ones are the Eastern Gate in Khorgos, Kazakhstan, and the Pengsheng Industrial Park in Jizzakh, Uzbekistan. Chinese companies have also invested heavily in agricultural projects: expanding farms into Tajikistan, establishing demonstration parks in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and setting up processing facilities across the region.

As it cultivates these interests in Central Asia, Beijing is increasing security assistance to the region's states. One of the central strategic interests underlying Chinese engagement is in bolstering the region's security through rapid economic

development. Central Asia's main strategic importance to China stems from its proximity to the far-western Chinese region of Xinjiang, which shares borders with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, as well as Afghanistan.

Xinjiang is largely inhabited by Uighur Muslims, who share many ethnic and cultural similarities with their Central Asian neighbors. According to official figures, the average economic growth rate in Xinjiang is 8.5 percent, approximately two percentage points above the national average. But since the 1990s, the region periodically has been beset by social unrest and terror attacks. The central government has dramatically increased its security presence and established what it calls vocational education and training centers for Uighur Muslims. Western researchers and human rights activists allege that they are really concentration camps.

Alongside their myriad infrastructure projects, Chinese companies have invested large sums in surveillance technologies that have been rolled out domestically under the banner of creating “smart cities” and are being marketed abroad as part of the Digital Silk Road. By the end of 2020, Huawei Technologies, the world's largest telecommunications equipment manufacturer, will have invested \$1 billion in Uzbekistan's digital infrastructure, in areas ranging from e-governance to facial-recognition software. A similar Huawei surveillance system is already in operation in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe and in shopping centers in a number of cities in Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan, Chinese-made surveillance software is in use with Russian-installed cameras.

China has also been strengthening military cooperation in the region through increased arms sales and a growing number of bilateral military exercises. In a secretive 2019 agreement, Tajikistan's government authorized China to build a training center, 11 outposts, and 30 to 40 smaller guard posts on the Tajik–Afghan border.

AGGRESSIVE ACTORS

There is no central Chinese institution coordinating the BRI. More than ten national government agencies are responsible for managing different aspects of the initiative, including the ministries of foreign affairs, culture, and commerce, as well as the recently created China International Development Cooperation Agency, which seeks to bring Beijing's foreign aid commitments closer in line with its foreign policy. For

BRI implementation, the three most important sets of organizations are China-owned or -led financial institutions, state-owned enterprises, and provincial-level governments.

Numerous Chinese or China-led lenders are involved in BRI. They include policy banks, such as the Export-Import Bank of China (ExIm Bank) and the China Development Bank; state-owned banks, including the China Construction Bank and the Agricultural Bank of China; state-owned funds, such as the Silk Road Fund; and China-led multilateral development banks, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank.

Not all of these entities are involved to the same extent. The AIIB, established to support BRI development projects, has invested only \$16 billion, according to its website. Meanwhile, the ExIm Bank had lent \$149 billion by April 2019, reflecting China's general preference for bilateral arrangements over working through multilateral institutions.

Chinese SOEs are central to the BRI's economic objective of creating an attractive external environment for Chinese trade. They are the companies most often contracted to construct the new infrastructure. By 2018, Chinese SOEs had been awarded half of all BRI projects, worth 70 percent of their total value.

These companies operate on a logic different from that of Western commercial enterprises. Since their financial security is often guaranteed by the government, they are able to engage in riskier projects, and are often accused by Western interests of violating World Trade Organization (WTO) limits on state aid. However, they are by no means fully under the control of Beijing. Just like other profit-making enterprises, they are also guided by commercial interests, local business opportunities, and the ambitions of their leaders.

Chinese provincial governments contribute to the BRI's expansion by managing the regulations for provincial-level SOEs and seeking out foreign projects that will drive local economic growth. Almost all provinces have developed their own BRI strategies and have looked for ways to internationalize their local economies. Xinjiang's BRI-related internationalization strategy is especially ambitious: not only is the region a central node in the SREB, it is also the starting point for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which links the

seaport at Gwadar on Pakistan's coast with Kashgar in southern Xinjiang.

While each of these three sets of actors—the lending institutions, state-owned enterprises, and provincial administrations—has its own priorities and operating logic, they can work together informally on behalf of Chinese interests overseas. Since institutions like the ExIm Bank are able to borrow at preferential rates, they can provide cheap credit to Chinese companies bidding for BRI projects, which in turn gives Chinese SOEs and private enterprises a comparative advantage in international tendering processes.

Many BRI projects are a result of bottom-up lobbying by individual companies that approach provincial governments with project proposals. The specifics of this process are notoriously opaque.

RETROSPECTIVE REBRANDING

The common perception that the BRI grew out of a grand strategy is further undermined by the fact that projects retrospectively rebranded as part of the initiative had been conceived much earlier. Although it was initially announced in 2013 (then called One Belt One Road in English, a direct translation of the Chinese *yi dai yi lu*), earlier iterations of the policy had been in operation since the 1990s. In 1999, President Jiang Zemin initiated the Going Out Policy, which encouraged Chinese SOEs to invest internationally. The policy made China one of the world's top overseas investors. In the same year, Jiang also introduced the Great Western Development Project, or “Go West” campaign, a comprehensive development plan for China's impoverished western regions. Infrastructure development was a key element of the campaign.

During the 2000s, the central government portrayed Xinjiang as a “Continental Eurasian Land-Bridge” connecting the rest of China with markets in Europe and Central Asia. Under the Go West Campaign, substantial Chinese investment was already flowing into Central Asia. By 2008, five years before the BRI was announced, China had already surpassed Russia as the largest investor in the region. The bulk of the investment allocated through the Go West policy was devoted to large energy and infrastructure projects such as power stations, railways, pipelines, and highways. Most of these have since been relabeled as BRI projects.

Sinophobia runs deep and does not appear to be abating.

Examples of this relabeling practice abound. The Kara-Balta oil refinery—operated by an SOE, the Jun Da China Petrol Company, and framed as a signature BRI project in Central Asia—was begun in 2012. The Pengsheng Industrial Park in Uzbekistan, established in 2009, was later linked to the BRI. The Yu'Xin'Ou Railway, a transcontinental freight corridor linking Chongqing to Europe via Xinjiang, opened in 2012 and was also later rebranded as a BRI project. A transit hub in Khorgos, on Xinjiang's northern border with Kazakhstan, now a central BRI "land port," had been under development since 2005.

There are many more. The Chinese government has not established criteria for what constitutes a BRI project, so provincial governments and corporations can frame virtually any project as being part of the initiative.

AN AMBIVALENT RECEPTION

While the BRI's potential benefits for Central Asian economies are obvious, local populations remain deeply suspicious of their large eastern neighbor. For them, China remains something of an unknown entity after its decades of regional isolation following the Sino-Soviet split and resultant anti-Chinese propaganda.

Local political elites often act as gatekeepers to BRI projects. They are able to combine inner knowledge of patronage networks with technical understanding of transnational finance, and with their ability to bypass anti-money laundering laws, in order to secure access to Chinese companies—and payoffs for their efforts. But they are often caught in a bind. They want investment in much-needed infrastructure, and they enjoy the personal financial gains that come with Chinese contracts. But they also need to be seen as responsive to the concerns of their citizens.

Chinese investments have rendered this region, whose politics was already characterized by informal deal-making among elites, even more prone to clientelism and corruption. Research I conducted with John Heathershaw and Alexander Cooley demonstrated that the practices of Chinese transnational corporations and SOEs in the region are determined by localized practices of corruption and graft rather than by directives from Beijing.

In Kyrgyzstan, few political leaders have been untouched by China-related corruption. The country's second president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, publicly criticized the regime of his predecessor, Atambek Akayev, for ceding over 1,250 square

kilometers of land to China. But he subsequently reversed himself under pressure from the Chinese embassy, retracting his comments and confirming his support for bilateral agreements with Beijing.

Bakiyev's successor, Almazbek Atambayev, was embroiled in another scandal involving a Chinese investment. A power plant built by a Chinese company without going through a tendering process broke down in January 2018, depriving millions of heating during a bitter winter.

Kyrgyzstan's current president, Soronbay Jeenbekov, has been linked to Chinese businessman Aierken Saimaiti, who was assassinated in Istanbul in November 2019 after allegedly transferring almost \$1 billion out of Kyrgyzstan's public coffers. The only Kyrgyz president to have avoided accusations of China-related graft happens to be the country's only female president to date, Roza Otunbayeva, who briefly held power between 2010 and 2011.

During my fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan studying local perceptions of China, I found that awareness of this high-level corruption was widespread. Ordinary citizens felt they were missing out on the benefits of Chinese investment. Chinese companies continued to bring in their own workers, while local laborers remained unemployed and in poverty. It was thought that the only locals truly benefiting from the Chinese presence were the political elites who could line their pockets with Chinese cash.

This public dissatisfaction breeds intermittent demonstrations that are nominally anti-Chinese, but often express concerns about local politicians' dealings with China. A number of protests have been sparked by environmental degradation caused by Chinese-run infrastructure projects. In August 2019, after livestock mysteriously began dying off, clashes broke out between Chinese mine workers and locals at a Chinese-operated gold mine in Kyrgyzstan's Naryn province.

In February 2020, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic made such public gatherings impossible, nearly 1,000 protesters in Naryn, which borders China and hosts a struggling special economic zone, demanded the cancellation of plans to allow China to build a \$275 million logistics hub. The government soon met the protesters' demand.

Despite China's efforts to promote its culture through its 11 Confucius Institutes in Central Asia, generous scholarships for study in China, and programs that facilitate visits to China by Central Asian public officials, Sinophobia runs deep and does not appear to be abating. One Bishkek

resident told me, “In my childhood, if we didn’t eat the food that our grandmother prepared, she would scare us by saying that the Chinese will come.”

Chinese officials know that their image in the region is poor, but they are adept at playing a long game. As long as local elites take Chinese money, they will be the ones who have to manage—and possibly suppress—the simmering discontent.

PANDEMIC COMPLICATIONS

Repercussions from the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to compound the challenges of China–Central Asia cooperation. At the time of this writing, the pandemic is resurgent in the region following an easing of lockdowns.

Before the crisis, China was the destination for a fifth of all Central Asian exports and the source of a third of the region’s imports. How the Chinese economy weathers the pandemic-induced storm will have a huge impact on Central Asian economies. Although Chinese gross domestic product shrank by 6.8 percent in the first quarter of 2020, compared with a year earlier, it rebounded to grow 3.2 percent in the second quarter. Annual growth is expected to be 1.8 percent, substantially lower than the usual rate of 6–8 percent.

The WTO expects global trade to fall by 32 percent this year. Developing countries, including those in Central Asia, are likely to be hardest hit. The largely remittance-based economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are under pressure as many migrant workers are laid off from jobs in Russia, while the resource-based economies of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan suffer from plummeting oil and gas prices.

Two strategies in response to the pandemic are available to Chinese economic planners. They may take advantage of the dire global economic situation and purchase more failing assets abroad, which will lead to greater levels of engagement in Central Asia and an acceleration of the BRI. Or they may rein in overseas loans and development projects and turn their focus inward. There is evidence that different actors are pursuing different strategies, which reinforces the conclusion that Chinese organizations rarely follow a coherent, centrally decided directive.

In May, the Chinese government announced a \$500 billion domestic stimulus package, financed by issuing special bonds for pandemic relief and local government bonds for infrastructure projects. The infrastructure funding has kick-started a revival of the Chinese construction industry. Local governments on China’s periphery could expand their already extensive cross-border collaboration with low-income neighboring countries, such as those of Central Asia, that are desperate for infrastructure and investment. Such an expansion occurred following the 2008 financial crisis. While BRI construction has temporarily ground to a halt, the evidence suggests that once travel restrictions are lifted, BRI-related activities will resume with renewed zeal.

But Chinese investments abroad were already slowing in 2019 due to the US–China trade war. Low levels of liquidity, as well as directives to SOEs and provincial governments to channel what cash they do have into the domestic economy, could accelerate this trend. That might force a temporary lull in engagement in Central Asia. Given the entanglement of Chinese and Central Asian economies,

even a brief pause in cooperation could have far-reaching social and political consequences. But the fundamentally decentralized nature of BRI is more likely to mean a ramping up of Chinese overseas activities in

some areas and withdrawal from others.

This all adds up to a picture of the BRI that contrasts with Beijing’s narrative of win-win cooperation, carefully planned and executed from the center. On the ground in Central Asia, the BRI is a messy, bottom-up, contradictory network of transnational clientelist relationships and semi-autonomous profit-seeking institutions, which serves to enrich local political elites while fueling resentment and suspicion among local populations. Whether their concerns can be allayed by reforms of the tendering process and new oversight mechanisms remains to be seen.

The Chinese leadership is certainly aware of these problems. Whatever happens, we can be reasonably confident that China-led development as a model of world order will continue to gain influence as developing countries look for leadership in an increasingly post-Western world. ■

Ordinary citizens felt they were missing out on the benefits of investment.

“Ultimately, it may take a climate-related natural disaster to spur Russia toward sustainability.”

Could Russia Embrace an Energy Transition?

VELI-PEKKA TYNKKYENEN

Vladimir Putin’s Russia is deeply dependent on its fossil energy resources. This dependence is more profound than the dysfunctional dynamic that political economists have traditionally believed is the result of the intertwining of natural resources and political power. In Russia, fossil energy and state power are entangled to such an extent that the spheres of culture and identity are also caught in the web.

Fossil energy is central to Russia’s economy. Oil, gas, and coal account for more than half the central government’s budget revenue. The oil and gas industries make up a fifth of gross domestic product.

Yet Russia has all the material resources needed to become an ecological great power—a green giant. It has the level of technological development required to foster an energy transition toward renewable resources and a low-carbon economy. The country’s vast forests offer great potential for bioenergy production, and its immense territory would allow it to develop a range of other forms of renewable energy.

Despite all this potential, the political elite’s deep attachment to the rents and power it derives from hydrocarbons leaves it strongly opposed to calls for an energy transition. Russia is lagging far behind other world powers—notably China, the European Union, and the United States—in the deployment of renewable energy.

Industries devoted to resource extraction have been at the core of the Russian economy throughout its history—from furs, coal, and ore to oil and gas. The resulting practices resembled those found in other colonial contexts around the world: Siberian expanses were seen as exploitable resource-rich

territories, and indigenous cultures were subjugated to serve the needs of the imperial center. During the Soviet era, industrialization relied on the heavy use of natural resources; industrial production targets were prioritized over social welfare and environmental protection.

Russia’s deposits of oil, gas, coal, and uranium are not evenly distributed across its Eurasian territory—they are found mainly in the periphery. Developing these resources thus has required major infrastructural investments. Yet the more Russia has invested in energy infrastructure (gas and oil pipelines, ports, and so forth), the more its strategic choices have narrowed. Revenues from hydrocarbons help maintain the existing networks of political power, and long-term investments in fossil-fuel infrastructures generate institutional inertia, making a transition to a carbon-free energy system less feasible.

Nonetheless, the government in recent years has promoted clean energy, at least in its official pronouncements. Its national strategies have stressed the priority of increasing energy efficiency throughout the economy, from households to the public sector and industry, and have urged the deployment of renewables as a substitute for oil and coal in the domestic energy mix. Of course, using less oil and gas domestically would allow more of it to be sold on international markets at higher premiums.

These strategies may well indicate the direction in which the government would like to see its energy policies eventually shift. The intent also may be to reassure the rest of the world about its goals. But the projections appear overly optimistic. Russia’s 2009 Energy Strategy states that the share of renewables in the national energy mix should cover 14 percent of total demand by 2030. More than a decade later, though, so-called new renewables (solar, wind, geothermal, and small-scale hydropower) account for just 1 percent of the nation’s energy supply.

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FOSSIL POWER

Putin's return to the Russian presidency in 2012, after a four-year interim as prime minister, began a new expansion of the political system's autocratic elements. This has been evident in both domestic and foreign policy. The Kremlin's emphasis is now on geopolitical sovereignty. Its tone on climate change leans toward denial, while it works to strengthen the link between fossil energy and Russian identity.

Russia's status as a hydrocarbon superpower gives it the ability to influence the political choices of other countries with its energy exports. Yet Russian elites and the public are ambivalent about the idea that hydrocarbons serve as the fundamental basis of Russia's status or national identity. The elites are aware of the economic problems related to hydrocarbon dependence: exporting raw materials while importing goods puts Russia in the company of developing nations. Although a majority of Russians consider their country an energy superpower, many live in poverty and resent the wealth enjoyed by the elites.

Meanwhile, global energy markets have changed greatly during the past decade due to the growing importance of unconventional hydrocarbons (shale oil and gas) and renewable sources. This has undermined Russia's export prospects, forcing it to engage in more aggressive competition—as was demonstrated by Moscow's maneuvers during the spring of 2020. When the coronavirus pandemic led to a collapse in energy demand worldwide, Russia initially refused to strike a deal with OPEC and the Saudis to reduce its oil production volumes. Once the price collapsed, Russia finally went along, but the production cuts were too limited and came too late to calm the markets. Prices partially recovered only after global consumption of oil began to rise again.

Before the pandemic, Moscow saw little reason to defer to ambitious international climate objectives, such as the pledged emission cuts under the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, and those set by the European Union's Green Deal policy (aiming to achieve a carbon-neutral economy by 2050) announced in December 2019. The Kremlin downplayed environmental responsibility while promoting a national identity based on hydrocarbons. A nation that sees its identity as intertwined with fossil energy is unlikely to take a progressive

role in global climate politics. And Moscow has further distanced itself from Western-backed agendas during its intensified confrontation with the West in the past few years, particularly since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Ukraine resulted in the imposition of US–European sanctions.

The Kremlin's notions of Russia's destiny as an energy superpower have been actively promoted by the hydrocarbon industry. The giant state-owned gas company Gazprom has run advertising campaigns to portray the industry as a guarantor of a uniquely Russian mix of neoconservative and traditional, patriarchal values, while casting Russian citizens and communities in submissive roles. These discourses, part of the regime's efforts to construct a hydrocarbon culture, are rooted in a nationalistic modernization ethos that has carried over from the Soviet era.

The governmental mentality visible in Gazprom's advertisements pursues various conservative objectives, but by far the most important is entrenching Putin's regime and its economic policy relying on the

extraction of fossil energy. Hydrocarbon culture serves as a tool to prevent popular criticism of an economy that resembles those of developing states in its dependence on exporting raw materials. This energy culture opposes the

modernization of Russia's economic and industrial policies. It also advocates authoritarian rule and the regime's great power ambitions.

Russia's energy culture distorts environmental policy as well. State-controlled national media propagate a climate-denial narrative, while state-owned energy firms block the development of more sustainable policies at the regional level.

SKEWED VISION

The severe effects of climate change should not come as a surprise to anyone, given the scientific evidence built up over the past few decades. But the Kremlin leadership tends to view climate change as beneficial, since other countries will suffer more than Russia. The narrative in the Russian media is that bad things may happen because of climate change, but Russia will not be affected. This story has been told to Russians since at least the 1990s.

The prevalent idea of Russia as a fortress surrounded by enemies skews security and risk perceptions. This parochial view of the world is

Russian elites perceive global climate governance as a zero-sum game.

unable to see climate change as a common problem facing all of humanity. Instead, Russian elites perceive global climate governance as a zero-sum game.

According to this worldview, the solution is not taking responsibility by reducing hydrocarbon production and consumption, but using thought control to instill climate denial at home while free-riding internationally, leaving other countries that are suffering more from global warming to assume the burdens of mitigation. Yet when those implementing mitigation measures, such as the EU, happen to be the main customers for Russia's energy exports, the fossil-based regime may perceive mitigation as a security threat.

Climate change will have global consequences for human security. It may cause conflicts and refugee crises in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa due to resource shortages. Yet such scenarios are almost completely absent from Russia's climate discussion. In the Russian media, refugee flows from the Middle East and Africa to Europe are depicted as a failure of the EU, and Moscow has tried to exploit the situation opportunistically. Yet the potential for climate change-induced Central Asian refugee flows to Russia is not considered.

In Russia, the warming climate will impose economic costs by thawing the permafrost that covers approximately 60 percent of the country's territory. Industrial, transportation, and housing infrastructure is vulnerable to permafrost thaw. Structures in these areas will be at risk of collapse in a warmer climate, as their foundations become unstable on the soft ground left behind by melting ice. The huge Norilsk diesel spill in June 2020 demonstrated these risks. At least 17,000 tons of diesel oil spilled into a lake and rivers flowing into the Arctic Ocean when the foundations of fuel storage tanks at a power plant collapsed after a heat wave that likely accelerated permafrost melting.

The majority of Russia's untapped hydrocarbon deposits are in the permafrost areas. Environmental change will darken the economic outlook for future projects to extract these deposits, which may eventually need to be written off as stranded assets. Russian energy companies have taken little action to hedge against this risk, even as some of their Western counterparts are announcing plans to begin a transition into renewables.

The Putin regime's nationalist-conservative shift makes it hard to imagine that Russia could take any meaningful role in the battle against climate change, especially given its failure to evaluate the

associated transnational risks. But climate change is a security threat for all nations. Ultimately, it may take a climate-related natural disaster to spur Russia toward sustainability. For now, the nation remains a laggard, unable to profit economically or politically from the transition to a new carbon-neutral world energy order.

The logic of a hydrocarbon culture is at odds with Russia's ambitions to rise to a higher level of technological progress. Developing more innovative industries, a prerequisite for transitioning toward a sustainable economy built on renewable energies, would necessitate abandoning that culture's practices and mentalities. Instead, the Kremlin is turning to both military and nonmilitary forms of aggression—a wide repertoire of tactics known as “hybrid warfare”—to compensate for the technological lead of Western countries and China.

Since 2015, Russia's National Security Strategy has stated that both direct and indirect means must be used in the global struggle for power to achieve a “strategic deterrent.” Thus a rapid global transition to new energy technologies may be viewed by Moscow as a security threat that must be confronted with hybrid warfare. Russian backing and financing for far-right parties in the EU is one example of this kind of action: right-wing populists try not only to weaken the EU, but also to dismantle its joint climate policy and prevent it from speaking with a common voice on energy and foreign policy. But building a more sustainable Russia, able to reap the benefits of the global energy transition, is not part of the Kremlin's strategy.

CHANGE FROM WITHIN

Under Putin, Moscow has continued the centuries-old practices of an empire that is violent toward its own people and the outside world, yet unable to harness Russia's bountiful resources and their potential to be part of a climate solution for the planet. Turning Russia into an internally strong and internationally respected player would require rethinking the objectives and rules of the game in both domestic and cross-border contexts. How can Russians foster change from within, and how can Russia's international partners encourage such a transformation?

Debunking hydrocarbon propaganda would be a first step. This might involve revealing the rationale as well as the actors behind specific promotional campaigns glorifying the hydrocarbon culture. Publishing such exposés will be difficult

in an increasingly closed media environment, but they are necessary to show the Russian people why clinging to oil and gas will be perilous for them. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny's widely viewed videos exposing high-level corruption could provide a model for how civil society might play a role in such a campaign.

The next step would be to develop an argument laying out Russia's potential to become an ecological great power. The nation could achieve sustainability by unleashing its potential in renewable energy, as well as in carbon storage. It could do so by protecting its forests, bogs, and permafrost. This would be a path to great power status achieved not through coercion, but through soft power. Russia would be respected for the ecological services it provided for the global community and the renewable energies that would fuel its own sustainable economy.

Since Russia exports most of its energy commodities, ending its addiction to windfall rents from oil and gas will require international cooperation on decarbonization. The global energy industry must face concerted pressure to account for the environmental costs of production. It should adopt measures such as carbon pricing, corporate responsibility certificates, and strict monitoring of environmental impacts.

Only this kind of global framework can curb national subsidies for fossil fuel production, allowing renewable energy to compete on a fair basis.

As Russia's biggest export market, the EU possesses substantial leverage that it has failed to use in its relations with Moscow. It must speak with a common voice to exert the full potential of its buying power. Brussels should enforce strict environmental and social responsibility norms for all imported energy sources.

Here, the EU's Green Deal and its newly established Energy Union can play a central role. The Green Deal aims to decarbonize the commodity chains of imported natural resources entering the EU zone; the Energy Union is an effort to establish a unified voice in energy policy, especially vis-à-vis the EU's main trade partners. A coordinated energy policy on the EU level could effectively counter Russia's divide-and-rule strategy of using attractively priced bilateral energy deals to discourage moves toward a united European position.

Putin's entourage seeks to portray such efforts to promote clean energy as part of an anti-Russian conspiracy. Yet debunking the hydrocarbon culture does not mean hindering investment in Russia. Instead, it would clear the way for investment to be diverted to businesses that play a role in the shift to a low-carbon society. Such an approach would encourage Russia to take its place at the forefront of the energy transition rather than continue to play a spoiler role, unable to define its own fate.

Domestically, the ruling bargain based on oil and gas must be replaced by regionalized social contracts that are derived from local socioeconomic strengths. This would reap the full potential of natural and human resources in each locality and region, instead of leaving them to rely on Moscow for patronage. Hydrocarbon culture is the antithesis of regionally sustainable economies; it discourages innovation based on local resources. Instead, it pacifies both citizens and regional leaders by promising welfare and sustainability, though it is not able to deliver either. The current protests against domineering rule from Moscow in the far eastern province of

Khabarovsk can be viewed as evidence of the failure of this hydrocarbon-based social contract.

HOW TO BE A GREEN GIANT

The geopolitical implications of a global transition to renewable energy are certain to pose risks for a monolithically ruled hydrocarbon culture like Russia's. Yet they represent a great opportunity for reshaping the country's society, politics, and economy on a more resilient and sustainable basis. The inevitable global energy transition has already started, but due to the Putin regime's refusal to recognize this reality, Russia is lagging far behind other powers in the competition to capitalize on the shift.

Moscow's resistance is not only self-defeating; it is also a threat to global peace and security. As long as Russia is unable to transform its economy, rewrite its social contract, and abandon the old model of hydrocarbon dominance, it will remain an unpredictable and dangerous player in a world that is gradually disengaging from fossil energy.

Although the prospect of hydrocarbons losing their profitability may appear distant, now is the time to prepare. Disasters such as the coronavirus pandemic could accelerate the transition away from oil and gas. Once a country falls behind in

The regime opposes the modernization of Russia's economic and industrial policies.

the race to deploy renewables on a large scale, it is very hard to catch up. Even if renewables are not a strategic factor in the near future, the ability to continue to do business as usual is eroding for fossil-dependent countries such as Russia.

If Russia reverses course and chooses to become an ecological great power in both words and deeds, shaping a new kind of culture and a new energy strategy that utilizes all the assets that its geography has to offer, the nation will flourish economically and its society will become more resilient. Its potentially enormous renewable energy resources could also offer solutions for a more sustainable world.

Russia could be the key to building a Eurasian electricity supergrid that would provide both transit and storage infrastructure across the region. Such a transnational project would allow Russia to sustainably harvest all of its potential—in agriculture, high-tech manufacturing, and education. The colossal structure and centralizing influence of the hydrocarbon culture would no longer block the nation's development.

Russia's relations with both Europe and China would be able to develop in more symmetric ways. A renewables-based electricity supergrid for Eurasia—stretching from Lisbon to Shanghai—would position Russia and its regions as indispensable actors in the production, transit, and storage of clean energy. Trade relations emerging from this network would confer economic, social, and environmental benefits. They would also address common threats, reducing unhealthy dependencies while enabling urgently needed action on climate change.

Fossil energy, political power, and climate denial are intertwined in Russia to such an extent that building support for an ambitious policy of reducing emissions and transitioning from a fossil-based energy system to a carbon-neutral one will be extremely difficult, even in the event that relatively more progressive leadership comes to power. But Russia has much more to gain than to lose from coming to terms with reality and seizing its opportunity to become a leader in the global shift to renewable energy. ■

“Although the vast majority of foreign governments still recognize Crimea as a Ukrainian territory under Russian occupation, the Kremlin . . . now operates there virtually unimpeded as a colonizing power.”

Russia's Recolonization of Crimea

AUSTIN CHARRON

More than six years have passed since Russia opportunistically annexed the Crimean Peninsula in the wake of Ukraine's 2013–14 Euromaidan Revolution. The Kremlin's grip on Crimea has only tightened in that time, yet many Ukraine watchers remain preoccupied with the Donbas region in the country's east. The Donbas has been devastated by protracted armed conflict and fractured into separate “Peoples' Republics” by Russia-backed separatists. In contrast, Russian forces managed to seize and impose formal sovereignty over Crimea in a virtually bloodless coup, staging a referendum on the region's status to cosmetically legitimize the occupation of another state's territory—the first such annexation to occur in Europe since World War II.

This semblance of legitimacy, coupled with Crimea's ethnic Russian majority and the long-standing presence of the Russian military in the Crimean port of Sevastopol, has led some outside observers to accept the Kremlin's rhetorical framing of Crimea's “reunification” with Russia as the restoration of a natural political and territorial order, even if they object to the subversive means by which it was achieved. In reality, Crimea's apparent Russianness is in no way natural or inherent, but rather a product of Russian/Soviet colonialism. The 2014 annexation merely revived centuries of violent imperial policy.

A HISTORY OF SUBJUGATION

In his now-infamous speech marking Russia's official absorption of Crimea on March 18, 2014, President Vladimir Putin declared that “in people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia.” He invoked a number

of popular myths meant to establish that the peninsula's Russian essence dated to antiquity. In fact, Crimea first entered the Russian sphere only in the late eighteenth century.

Seeking to extend its military presence in the Black Sea region and bolster its image as a formidable imperial power, the Russian Empire under Catherine II formally annexed and began colonizing Crimea in 1783. (For the sake of historical perspective, this was just one year before the founding of the first Russian colony in Alaska.) Russian forces pried Crimea from its joint rule under the Ottoman Empire and the Crimean Khanate; the latter was a vestige of the Mongol Empire led by the peninsula's primary indigenous group, the Crimean Tatars. Descended from a diverse array of nomadic and sedentary peoples who had made their homes on the peninsula over millennia, the Crimean Tatars are Turkic-speaking Muslims whose national identity is deeply rooted in their sense of belonging to Crimea.

Mimicking the policies of other European colonizers, Russian authorities swiftly confiscated Crimea's lands and redistributed them among the Russian nobility, forcing the Crimean Tatars into economic, political, cultural, and religious subjugation. Crimea was also rapidly militarized, beginning with the founding of Sevastopol as a strategic naval base near the peninsula's southwestern tip. This base would place Crimea at the center of the Crimean War of 1853–56, pitting Russia against its imperial rivals: Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire.

Spurred initially by Russia's oppressive policies and later by the widespread violence of the Crimean War, an exodus of Crimean Tatars to Ottoman territories initiated a drastic shift in the peninsula's demographics during the nineteenth century. Thousands of predominantly Slavic peasants arrived to fill the resultant labor shortage. The growth of Crimea's Slavic population—comprising

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mostly Russians—soon dwarfed the dwindling number of Crimean Tatars, who were reduced to about one-quarter of the population by the time the Soviet Union was founded in 1922. By then, Crimea was already steeped in a Russian mythology that identified the peninsula as the birthplace of Russian Orthodoxy, a symbol of military glory, the muse of cherished Russian writers and artists, and a playground of the elite.

Despite superficial efforts to promote the development of Crimean Tatar culture and language through policies of *korenizatsiya*, or “root-making,” that were applied to ethnic minorities throughout the Soviet Union, the early Soviet period saw a continuation of imperial policies that expanded Russian cultural hegemony and majority status in Crimea. This trend culminated tragically on May 18, 1944, when Joseph Stalin ordered that the entire Crimean Tatar population be rounded up and deported to Central Asia and other far-flung corners of the Soviet Union—an act predicated on false accusations of widespread collaboration with German forces during the Nazi occupation of Crimea. Some estimate that nearly half of the roughly 240,000 deported Crimean Tatars perished in transit to their places of exile. The survivors were forbidden under Soviet law from returning to their homeland for the next 45 years. Effectively emptied of its indigenous people, Crimea’s forced transformation into a Russian cultural space was complete.

Although Russians now constituted a clear majority on the peninsula, Crimea was transferred to the Ukrainian republic of the Soviet Union in 1954—a move presented as an act of “friendship” between Russians and Ukrainians, but based on practical considerations regarding transportation and energy infrastructure and efficiency of territorial administration. Once home to palaces and manicured grounds belonging to the Russian nobility, by the 1950s Crimea emerged as a center of tourism for the proletariat masses and of retirement homes for the Soviet elite, further obfuscating the erasure of its indigenous population and culture.

Crimea became a part of independent Ukraine after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, though Russia retained control of the naval base at Sevastopol. Strong pro-Russian sentiment among many residents nearly plunged Crimea into ethno-territorial conflict in the early 1990s, but tensions eventually cooled to a simmer until 2014.

Following a decades-long protest movement unrivaled in Soviet history for its persistence and determination, the Crimean Tatars had won the hard-fought right to return to Crimea in the late 1980s, and began arriving in large numbers after 1991. Unable to reclaim their former homes and lands now occupied by Russians and Ukrainians, the Crimean Tatars built squatter communities in unoccupied areas across the peninsula that were gradually integrated into the urban landscape. Despite receiving only meager support from the nascent Ukrainian state, the Crimean Tatars viewed Kyiv as an ally against the latent threat of Russian separatism in Crimea, and most backed Ukrainian sovereignty over their homeland.

By 2014, Crimean Tatars made up only about 12 percent of Crimea’s population; ethnic Ukrainians accounted for around 24 percent, and ethnic Russians still held the majority with roughly 60 percent. Seizing on the brief power vacuum created in the days immediately after the Euromaidan Revolution toppled the Russia-friendly administration of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, on February 27, 2014, the Kremlin

orchestrated a takeover of Crimea’s organs of power by the “little green men”—Russian military personnel wearing no national insignia.

The occupying forces hastily organized a March 16 referendum on Crimea’s status. The vote was riddled with improprieties and dubiously returned near-unanimous support for joining Russia.

Accepting these results and officially annexing the peninsula on March 18, Russia completed its second seizure of Crimea some 231 years after the first, and 23 years after losing it to independent Ukraine. Although the vast majority of foreign governments still recognize Crimea as a Ukrainian territory under Russian occupation, the Kremlin has thoroughly integrated the peninsula into its federal structure and now operates there virtually unimpeded as a colonizing power.

ON MOSCOW TIME

Due to the legacy of Crimea’s initial colonization, Russian language, culture, and ethnic identities still predominated on the peninsula by the time the Kremlin reclaimed it. But formal changes were nevertheless required to bring Crimea into alignment with the Russian Federation’s political and judicial order.

Crimea’s apparent Russianness is in no way natural or inherent.

Crimea entered Russia's administrative structure as two separate federal subjects: the Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol. Together, the two initially constituted their own federal district, but they were merged with the Southern Federal District in July 2016. Crimea's clocks were moved forward two hours on March 30, 2014, to shift the peninsula from Kyiv's time zone to Moscow's. The Russian ruble replaced the Ukrainian hryvnia as the official currency a month later.

The legal status of Crimea's residents also changed immediately following the annexation. Everyone was automatically given Russian citizenship unless they filed a formal refusal during a brief period in April 2014. Those who refused and retained only their Ukrainian citizenship were rendered foreigners in their own homeland and summarily denied basic rights, including access to health care, formal employment, ownership and registration of real estate or private businesses, and banking or other financial services.

Imposing Russian sovereignty over Crimea also involved removing and replacing all of its ministries, institutions, organs, and symbols of Ukrainian state authority with Russian versions thereof—often employing the same officials and functionaries as before, provided they demonstrated loyalty to the occupying regime. For example, Chernomorneftegaz, a Crimea-based subsidiary of the Ukrainian state oil and gas company Naftogaz, was absorbed by the Russian-owned energy conglomerate Gazprom immediately following the annexation. Control of Chernomorneftegaz and of the exclusive economic zone in the waters surrounding Crimea gives Russia access to some 80 percent of Ukraine's underdeveloped oil and natural gas reserves in the Black Sea. In light of this, some analysts argue that resource extraction was one of the underlying motives of the Kremlin's colonialist drive to recapture Crimea.

The consolidation of Russian authority over Crimean institutions extends beyond those linked directly to the Ukrainian state. In October 2017, Russia's Constitutional Court upheld the uncompensated nationalization of dozens of privately owned businesses, properties, and industries in Crimea over the objections of their previous owners and of Russia's own Ministry of Justice.

ECONOMIC DISAPPOINTMENTS

Since 2014, Moscow has pumped billions of dollars into the region's economy through subsidies and investments, dwarfing the volume of

funding that Kyiv's much smaller federal budget could provide even before 2014. This is frequently touted as evidence of Russia's benevolent stewardship of Crimea.

Between a special development fund and direct subsidies from the Russian federal budget—which account for nearly 70 percent of the territory's own budget—Crimea had received roughly 1.43 trillion rubles (around \$22 billion) in transfer payments from the federal government by March 2019. The Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol are now among the regions most financially dependent on the Russian state.

Most of the development fund has gone toward improving and expanding Crimea's infrastructure, with the lion's share (228 billion rubles) devoted to the construction of the massive Crimean Bridge linking the peninsula and the Russian mainland. Completed in December 2019, the 11-mile-long bridge crosses the choppy waters of the Kerch Strait, which had deterred past attempts to bridge Crimea and neighboring Krasnodar Krai. Since there was no way to reach Crimea from Russia by land without traveling through the Ukrainian mainland, the Kremlin fast-tracked the bridge's construction immediately after the annexation, despite logistical concerns.

Along with this massive influx of federal investments and subsidies, Crimeans were promised in 2014 that their wages, pensions, and living standards would rise beyond Ukrainian averages to meet Russia's much higher standards. The World Bank estimates that Russia's gross national income per capita was the equivalent of \$25,330 in 2013—three times higher than Ukraine's, at \$8,500—while the Russian average monthly pension amounted to about \$285, compared with \$160 in Ukraine. Many Crimeans therefore heralded “reunification” with Russia as deliverance from a bleak financial outlook under Ukraine. For some, these expectations were initially fulfilled.

In 2015 and 2016, I interviewed dozens of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Crimea now living in mainland Ukraine. Several spoke of increases in public-sector salaries and state pensions, immediately after the annexation, that doubled or tripled many people's previous earnings. However, in the words of one interviewee, these were temporary increases meant to “buy the loyalty” of the Crimean people; they were summarily reduced after 2014. In a notorious exchange between retirees and Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev during his visit to

Crimea in May 2016, he dismissed complaints about the inadequacy of their monthly pensions with the blithe remark, “There is no money, but you hang in there!”

Overall, average income in Crimea has risen since the annexation, but after six years it still remains well below the Russian average. In February 2020, the average monthly income in Russia was around 47,000 rubles, while the average in Crimea was only about 32,000 rubles. And much of the increase has been negated by a decrease in Crimeans’ purchasing power: prices of many goods have risen sharply since 2014 due to inflation, increased transportation costs, and international sanctions restricting trade with the occupied region. In 2015, Crimea was declared a Free Economic Zone with generous tax exemptions to incentivize domestic and foreign investment in the region, but foreign investment remains paltry due to the ongoing sanctions.

COSTS OF ISOLATION

The lives and livelihoods of average Crimeans have been directly affected in other detrimental ways as a result of the international response to Russia’s annexation. Sanctions prohibit most credit card companies from operating in Crimea, severing many residents from their financial backstop, while the closure of Ukrainian banks on the peninsula left thousands without access to their savings. Despite the construction of a new airport in Simferopol—another project funded by Russia’s development fund—sanctions prohibit international airlines from serving Crimea or even flying in its airspace, effectively preventing Crimeans from flying anywhere except within Russia. Crimean Federal University remains unaccredited by any international agency or institution, rendering a degree earned there essentially meaningless anywhere outside of Russia.

The Ukrainian response to the Russian occupation has also had dire consequences for Crimea’s residents. Initially, Kyiv did not completely suspend trade and transportation between occupied Crimea and the Ukrainian mainland, but the piecemeal imposition of new customs and immigration regimes on both sides of the de facto border nevertheless led to a gradual deterioration of Crimea’s connectivity with the rest of Ukraine.

Ukrainian rail service to the peninsula was suspended in December 2014, requiring travelers in either direction to cross the border on foot, severely complicating the journey. Beginning in September 2015, Crimean Tatar activists organized a grassroots blockade of all Ukrainian goods entering Crimea, prompting the Ukrainian government to issue a formal embargo on trade with the occupied territory by the end of that year.

Crimea had long relied on Ukrainian electricity and water passing through the narrow Isthmus of Perekop—Crimea’s only land bridge to the mainland—but it was cut off from these resources following the annexation. In late 2015, Ukrainian activists destroyed power lines carrying hydroelectricity to Crimea, resulting in months of intermittent blackouts as local officials scrambled to make up the energy deficit. Starting in 2014, Ukrainian authorities restricted and ultimately suspended the flow of water from the Dnipro River into the Northern Crimean Canal—the peninsula’s primary source of water for agricultural use—result-

ing in widespread drought conditions across northern parts of the territory and higher prices for local produce. Lower-than-average rainfall across Crimea has already made 2020 one of its driest years on record, threaten-

ing the region’s supply of drinking water as well.

While some may blame Kyiv for the pain caused by these policies, Ukraine is under no obligation to provide resources or services to Crimea while it remains under Russian occupation. Ultimately, Russia’s inability to provide Crimea with adequate resources is a reflection of the haste with which it seized the peninsula, and the illegitimate status of its rule there.

RUSSIFYING TRANSFORMATIONS

Some of the starkest changes that Crimea has undergone since the annexation are those related to its social and cultural environment, which has grown increasingly nationalistic. The retaking of Crimea was a watershed moment for Russian nationalism, and the peninsula has since been brandished as a defiant symbol of a reinvigorated sense of national pride. In 2014, “Crimea is Ours” (*Krym Nash*) became a popular refrain among Russian nationalists, used to taunt Ukrainian and Western critics of the annexation. Images of

*The 2014 annexation revived
centuries of violent
imperial policy.*

Crimea now grace Russian banknotes circulated throughout the country.

In many ways, Crimea has become a showcase for this nationalistic revival. Billboards bearing images of Putin and touting the region's glorious "reunification" with Russia are now ubiquitous. Since 2014, local officials have also erected numerous monuments to cultural and political figures from Russian and Soviet history, including key actors in Crimea's colonial experience, such as Empress Catherine II, Tsar Nicholas II, and, most troublingly, Joseph Stalin. The Soviet ruler has undergone something of a rehabilitation across Russia in recent years, but this has been especially prominent in Crimea. Stalin's image is deeply offensive to the Crimean Tatars, who remember their people's suffering from the 1944 deportation that he ordered.

In another manifestation of Russian nationalism rooted in Soviet nostalgia, Crimean children are increasingly subjected to "patriotic education" exercises that glorify the military and indoctrinate them with animosity toward Russia's perceived enemies—including Ukraine. As part of this reeducation program, children are dressed in military uniforms and paraded as political props during patriotic celebrations, particularly Victory Day—commemorating the Soviet triumph over Nazi Germany in World War II—normally celebrated on May 9, but postponed until June 24 this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While Crimea's youth are being primed for military service, the United Nations estimates that at least 21,000 young men from the territory had already been conscripted into the Russian military as of February 2020—a violation of international law, since most of the world considers Russia a foreign occupier. Crimea has undergone rapid militarization since 2014, in one of the clearest parallels to its colonial past. Establishing a military presence in the heart of the Black Sea region was one of the motives driving Russia's initial annexation of Crimea in the eighteenth century, and Russia maintained a limited naval presence in Sevastopol even after Ukraine became independent. Under its current occupation, Crimea has seen a dramatic influx of Russian military personnel and equipment.

Once limited by bilateral agreements with Kyiv to the port of Sevastopol, the Russian military has expanded to bases across Crimea. Its personnel in the region have nearly tripled, from 12,500 before the annexation to 31,500 as of March 2019.

The numbers of Russian tanks, armored vehicles, artillery pieces, aircraft, ships, and submarines stationed in Crimea have similarly multiplied during the same period, transforming the occupied peninsula into a heavily fortified military outpost. There are fears that the Kremlin may be preparing to deploy nuclear weapons to the peninsula as well.

In another clear echo of Crimea's prior experience of colonization, there has been an influx of Russian citizens taking up residency in the region since 2014. According to Russian state statistics, just over 140,000 citizens relocated to Crimea (including Sevastopol) from other regions of Russia between 2014 and 2018. However, this figure accounts only for those who officially transferred their residential registration to Crimea; it does not include Russian citizens who may reside permanently in Crimea but remain registered elsewhere. Crimean activists now located in mainland Ukraine estimate that the true number of recently resettled Russian citizens in Crimea is much higher—some unsubstantiated claims range as high as one million.

Coupled with the internal displacement of some tens of thousands of Crimeans to mainland Ukraine (the total number is nearly impossible to determine, but the minimum estimate is 20,000), this population transfer has precipitated a substantial shift in Crimea's demographic makeup. There are many ethnic Russians among the ethnic Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, and other minorities who left Crimea for mainland Ukraine after the annexation, and those arriving from Russia are not all ethnically Russian. But the net increase of ethnic Russians has almost certainly brought their share of Crimea's population above the 60 percent or so that they accounted for before the annexation.

Regardless of ethnic affiliation, new arrivals from Russia are likely to support Moscow's claims to Crimea over Kyiv's, strengthening the Kremlin's grip on the peninsula. Just as the Russian Empire's colonizing strategy in Crimea involved the resettlement of Slavs to gradually transform the peninsula into a territory dominated by Russian language, culture, and identities, so, too, has the Russian Federation relied on population transfers to once again remake Crimea in its own image.

SILENCING DISSENT

Of all the developments in Russian-occupied Crimea over the past six years, the most egregious

are the ongoing violations of the human rights of groups and individuals who express opposition to the occupation. Russian authorities in Crimea have routinely harassed, intimidated, fined, and imprisoned those perceived to pose a threat to the region's new status quo. A Russian law, implemented just two months after the annexation, criminalizes and heavily penalizes any speech or action aimed at violating the nation's "territorial integrity"—handing authorities in Crimea a powerful legal tool with which to silence voices of opposition.

But the silencing of critical voices began even before this law took effect. Among the first to face retribution for speaking critically of Russian actions in Crimea were journalists working for Ukrainian and independent media outlets. Just days after the seizure of Crimea in February 2014, Russian authorities moved swiftly to control the press by shuttering Crimea-based news agencies, blocking access to critical news sources from Ukraine and abroad, and establishing a homogeneously pro-Russian media landscape on the peninsula. Several Crimea-based journalists reported being targeted with personal attacks and intimidation perpetrated by both figures of authority and belligerent civilians. This atmosphere prompted an exodus of many Crimean journalists to mainland Ukraine.

Suppressing Ukrainian identities has been another key element of transforming Crimea back into a Russian colony. Although Crimea had been affixed to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic only in 1954, and ethnic Ukrainians were still a minority in the region even before the 2014 annexation, thousands of Crimeans nevertheless continue to speak the Ukrainian language—at least at home—and identify as Ukrainians on an ethnic and/or civic basis. But Ukraine and Ukrainian national identities are now routinely vilified in occupied Crimea: spurious threats of anti-Russian extremism and violent Ukrainian nationalism, allegedly stirred up during the Euromaidan Revolution, have calcified into the official narrative for why the Russian annexation was necessary and just.

Although Ukrainian remains an official regional language of Russian-occupied Crimea, its use is anathema in most places, and access to Ukrainian-language education and media has been almost entirely curtailed. Several Ukrainian-identifying Crimeans have been harassed, persecuted, or

imprisoned for vocally opposing the annexation. The most prominent example was filmmaker Oleg Sentsov, who was arrested in May 2014 along with three other men on falsified charges of "terrorism" and held as a Russian political prisoner outside Crimea until his release in a September 2019 prisoner swap with Ukraine. The Russian occupiers thus routinely violate the very rights of Ukrainian Crimeans that they claim to be safeguarding for Russian Crimeans against the phantom threat of Ukrainian extremism.

INTERNAL EXILES

The rhetoric of "extremism" and "terrorism" has been deployed most aggressively against another opponent of the Russian occupation of Crimea—the Crimean Tatars. The Kremlin perceives them as an existential threat to Russian authority in Crimea for three main reasons: their long history of oppression and deportation at the hands of Russian and Soviet colonizers has steeled their resolve against accepting the occupation; they emerged during the Euromaidan as one of Crimea's most avowedly pro-Ukrainian communi-

ties; and their status as an indigenous people affords them a more powerful voice on the global stage and within certain international organizations. Adopting the West's language of antiterrorism and securitization, Rus-

sia has waged an appalling campaign of oppression against the Crimean Tatars, seeking to grind them into submission. After first heavily restricting the activities of the Crimean Tatars' representative body, the Mejlis, Russian authorities declared it an extremist organization in 2016, effectively outlawing the body and driving many of its leaders into exile.

The Crimean Tatars have been accused of extremism on religious grounds. Members of the international organization known as Hizb-ut-Tahrir—a nonviolent Islamic fundamentalist group outlawed for extremism in Russia but allowed to operate in Ukraine and many other countries—were rendered criminals overnight when the Kremlin claimed sovereignty over Crimea. Most fled to mainland Ukraine. Unannounced home raids, often resulting in arrests for alleged possession of "extremist" literature, are now routine for the tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars remaining in occupied Crimea, especially those who adhere to more

Russia has relied on population transfers to remake Crimea in its own image.

traditional or conservative Islamic practices. Dozens of Crimean Tatars—mostly men—have gone missing or have been found murdered across Crimea since 2014.

Aside from a small but prominent number of exceptions deemed “collaborationists” by the rest of the community, the Crimean Tatars remain steadfastly opposed to Russian occupation and supportive of Ukraine’s claims to the region. Enduring the Kremlin’s oppressive regime, they understand it as only the latest iteration in a centuries-long cycle of colonization of their homeland.

Freedom House, a US human rights organization, now consistently rates Crimea as one of the least-free territories in the world, with an overall score of 8 out of 100 in 2020—placing it just above Somalia and Saudi Arabia, and well below Russia’s own dismal score of 20. In response both to this erosion of rights and to the region’s deteriorating economic conditions, tens of thousands of Crimeans have relocated to mainland Ukraine as IDPs. Resettling mostly in the cities of Kyiv and Lviv, the Crimean IDP population consists of ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, and other minorities who found living in Crimea no longer safe or viable under Russian occupation.

My own fieldwork among Crimeans in mainland Ukraine reveals that the IDP community is highly educated and younger on average compared with Crimea or all of Ukraine, and includes many people representing the region’s cultural, educational, entrepreneurial, and political elite. Much of the Crimean Tatars’ political leadership is now in exile on the Ukrainian mainland. The Mejlis operates out of a new headquarters in Kyiv. After its campus became the center of the newly consolidated Crimean Federal University, Tavri-da National University—once Crimea’s most prestigious—was reestablished in the Ukrainian capital as well. Through its IDPs and institutions,

a Ukrainian Crimea thus lives on in some capacity on the mainland, while Crimea itself now suffers from a brain drain effect that will further hinder its prospects for development and prosperity as long as its most talented and educated residents remain in exile.

IMPERIAL PROJECT

While the 2014 annexation of Crimea was lauded in Russia and among its enablers abroad as the “reunification” of an estranged territory with the state to which it rightfully and “naturally” belongs, a historical perspective reveals it to be merely the resurrection of a centuries-long project of colonization. First annexed in the late eighteenth century and gradually transformed into a characteristically Russian territory through population transfers and the cleansing of its indigenous people and culture, Crimea is now experiencing recolonization after a brief respite under Ukrainian sovereignty.

Just as it did in centuries past, the Kremlin forcibly seized Crimea and precipitated a demographic shift by driving out its indigenous peoples and other opponents while encouraging an influx of its own citizens. Russia is remaking Crimea’s social, political, legal, and economic order in its own image, and expanding its military presence in the region. New investment has principally gone toward accelerating integration with Russia, while average Crimeans have seen little to no improvement in their economic prospects despite promises to the contrary.

During a time of global upheaval and uncertainty, the Russian occupation of Crimea has understandably fallen out of the headlines. Nevertheless, it is important not to lose sight of the Kremlin’s illegal and oppressive actions in Crimea and their historical context. This recolonization should not be normalized. ■

Catastrophe and Denial in Belarus

DAVID R. MARPLES

In Belarus, the COVID-19 pandemic was dismissed by the country's president, Alexander Lukashenko, as a mere "psychosis" that can be fought off with regular meals or vodka, visits to the countryside or a sauna. As the virus spread around the world, and while other countries went into lockdown, Belarus took no official measures. Its soccer league was allowed to start on schedule, in stadiums open to the public. On May 9, the cities of Minsk and Brest proceeded at the president's insistence with impressive Victory Day celebrations to commemorate the defeat of the Nazis in World War II, complete with troops parading in close formation and thousands in attendance. Lukashenko and his son Mikalai presided over the parade in Minsk.

Lukashenko, the only president the Republic of Belarus has had to date, has been in power for 26 years, leading an authoritarian state that is regarded by some as a dictatorship. He entered office in the summer of 1994 in a democratic election, but he has held on to power ever since through carefully manipulated votes, denying his opponents a level playing field. He faced a new election in early August 2020, and though few expected change, a new challenger, Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, whose husband had been barred from running and jailed, attracted huge crowds to her rallies.

In its earlier guise as Soviet Belorussia, the nation faced two catastrophes outside of the officially recognized war years. In each of those cases—Stalin's mass executions (1937–41) at the Kurapaty Forest in northern Minsk and other locations, and the Chernobyl disaster of 1986—the response has been to ignore and forget, just as in the current pandemic. Is this a peculiarly Belarusian response to catastrophes?

Such reactions at any rate seem typical of Lukashenko and his government when faced with an overwhelming disaster: they declared Chernobyl to be officially over early in the twenty-first

century, and they have had problems even acknowledging the existence of a pandemic that had afflicted almost 70,000 residents of Belarus by late July. As the political analyst Vitali Shkliarov has asked:

What is the real invisible enemy? Is it a microscopic virus or unseen radiation particles in the air? Or is it an unwillingness to wrestle with events now invisible in contemporary life because they have never seen the light of day?

RESHAPING THE PAST

The Second World War had a particularly devastating impact on Belarus, which lost around two million people, including about 80 percent of its prewar Jewish population. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, Lukashenko began to use the war as the defining symbol of national identity in Belarus, building on the Soviet legacy of the 1960s, but with singularly Belarusian content. Thus, Victory Day celebrated the partisans (irregular anti-Nazi resistance fighters who operated mostly on Belarusian territory from 1941 to 1944), the air force, and their heroic conquest of the "brown plague" of fascism. The Holocaust was either left out of the narrative or subsumed under the losses incurred by Soviet citizens.

The theme of national victimization in the war has been encapsulated in a memorial site at Khatyn. Located about 40 miles from Minsk at the site of a village destroyed by police forces working for the Germans, the memorial honors all of the settlements razed by the Nazis, which are named on plaques. An elderly man who was the only resident of Khatyn to survive the massacre is memorialized in a statue at the entrance. It depicts his gaunt frame holding a dead child, a somber scene made even more so when a bell tolls mournfully in the background.

Most Belarusians can identify with these images. But they can also recall memories that have been passed down from an earlier period when the republic was a target of Stalin's Great

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Purges. To the north of Minsk, about 30,000 victims of the NKVD (the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, later known as the KGB) are buried in Kurapaty Forest. A memorial site there is maintained mostly by nongovernmental organizations and opposition parties including the Christian Conservative Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, the Christian Democratic Party, the Youth Front, and others.

In November 2018, the authorities agreed to allow a monument to be built on the site. But it includes no mention either of who carried out the killings or the identity of the victims. In 2019, Lukashenko ordered the removal of over 100 crosses and the erection of a fence around the site. At the entrance, incongruously, businessmen have opened a restaurant called "Lets Go! Let's Eat!" The site's supporters regard it as sacrilegious, an affront to the memory of the corpses in the forest.

The contrast between the two sites at Khatyn and Kurapaty is a reflection of the conflicted official stance on memory-making. Hitler's victims can be remembered, but Stalin's victims create problems because the revered victory in World War II occurred under his leadership. Thus, the official attitude is that Belarusians must forget about Stalin's crimes, even though a growing number of mass burial sites have been uncovered, particularly in the past six years.

FORGETTING CHERNOBYL

In late April 1986, explosions at the Chernobyl nuclear power complex, just across the southern border in Ukraine, contaminated large swathes of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic with radio-nuclides, particularly iodine-131, strontium-90, and cesium-137. About 80 percent of the republic was affected by iodine, while the other two radio-nuclides, with half-lives of three decades, were more persistent in the southeast and southern regions.

For several years after the accident, many families continued to live in the area and eat food grown on contaminated land. By 1990, thyroid cancer began to appear among children—around 300 cases at first, but soon rising to several thousand. Other diseases and ailments also cropped up, and the general level of resistance to illness declined. While it was still part of the Soviet Union, the republic did not need to assume direct

responsibility for such issues. But after Belarus became independent in 1991, health problems stemming from Chernobyl radiation consumed as much as a quarter of the entire health budget.

In 2004, Lukashenko decided to lift restrictions on life in the contaminated zone. He declared that the accident was a thing of the past and that it was time to resume cultivation of the land. He encouraged evacuated families to return to the afflicted area in the Homiel (Russian spelling: Gomel) region. Horses and cattle could be grazed and bred, flax and other crops grown, and the whole area rejuvenated. After all, returnees would need jobs.

Lukashenko's approach reflected his desire to restore the dormant economy of southeast Belarus, but also impatience to overcome the psychological effects of the nuclear accident. People might be putting themselves in danger by returning, but their very presence would provide a solution of sorts. Whereas Ukraine was still struggling with the effects of Chernobyl, it could now be said that Belarus had surmounted the disaster, thanks to the boldness of its leader.

The same attitude has shaped the nation's energy policies, particularly the construction of a nuclear power station, the country's first, at Astraviec (Ostrovets), close to the border with Lithuania.

Two 1,200-megawatt reactors are expected to come online late in 2020.

Building a nuclear power plant in the country that was worst affected by Chernobyl might seem foolhardy, but the new plant is needed to offset dependence on Russian oil and gas. The fact that it was built and financed by Russia, using Russian reactors, was kept firmly out of the public discussion. At the same time, information about the health effects of Chernobyl that contradicted the former Soviet Union's official version—which acknowledged only 54 deaths—continues to be suppressed.

VIRAL DENIAL

Like Chernobyl, the coronavirus presented a problem that could not be resolved by force. Lukashenko and his government seemingly had no response to it. They believed they lacked the resources to resist the virus without undermining the country's economy. They assumed that a lockdown would spell disaster, especially in an election year. The president's answer was to declare COVID-

Like Chernobyl, the coronavirus could not be resolved by force.

19 a fabrication, a psychosis invented in the West. He claimed that no one had died from the virus; underlying illnesses had caused every death. Life—and the economy—must go on.

It was critical to Lukashenko that the Victory Day Parade proceed as planned. It was the 75th anniversary of the end of the war, and the last major anniversary that could include some who had a living memory of the events, despite the fact that these veterans were in the age group most vulnerable to the virus. Thus, it had to take place, even after Russian President Vladimir Putin postponed the Moscow version until June 24.

The Ministry of Health has continued to publish daily reports of new reported cases of COVID-19 infections. But as with Chernobyl, the official death toll, which stood at 543 as of July 28, does not appear to correspond to the total number of deaths attributable to the virus, given the extent to which it has spread. The reported incidence of death per total number of cases was around 0.5 percent at the start of June, compared with 6 percent in the United States.

Sweden, the only other country in Europe not to respond with a lockdown, had recorded over 4,400 deaths as of June 1, for a fatality rate of 11.7 percent. But Sweden at that time had 37,452 positive cases, considerably fewer than the 44,255 in Belarus. The size of their respective populations is also quite similar. The difference is that in Belarus, it is still possible to suppress unpleasant information.

That assessment, to be sure, comes with a caveat. Belarusian civil society, in the absence of leadership from above, has started a number of new initiatives in response to overcrowded hospitals and lack of personal protective equipment for medical workers. A volunteer movement called ByCovid19, which distributes medical equipment such as syringes and face masks, was launched on March 26 and managed to raise \$250,000 in less than seven weeks.

UNEXPECTED CHALLENGE

A new sense of activism has also emerged in the political arena. Thousands took to the streets to support groups gathering signatures for new opposition candidates for the August 9 presidential election—observing social distancing, wearing masks, and waiting patiently to get to the signing table.

The prominent vlogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, who has a YouTube channel with over 200,000 subscribers, was arrested in May while campaigning for his wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, after he

was barred from the race. The authorities said they found large sums of cash in his apartment, ostensibly to fund a foreign-backed uprising. The furious reaction catalyzed his wife's campaign, which called on voters to "Stop the cockroach!"

Two other opposition candidates were arrested and barred from running. Viktor Babaryka, who held a lead in some polls, faces serious fraud charges after police raided Russian-owned Belagazprom Bank, which he had headed until recently. Valery Tsepkala, a former ambassador to the United States, fled to Russia.

However, the Central Election Commission did allow Tsikhanouskaya's candidacy. Her campaign was aided by Tsepkala's wife, Veranika, and Babaryka's campaign manager, Maria Kalesnikova. They proved an effective team, despite Lukashenko's scornful dismissal of the possibility of a female president. (He ignored the fact that several of the governments with the most successful pandemic responses to date have been led by women.)

Tsikhanouskaya vowed, if she won, to hold new elections with all three imprisoned candidates. The crowds that assembled to back her in the middle of a pandemic and in the face of mass arrests and harassment spoke volumes about Lukashenko's declining power. The fear factor had disappeared. Belarusians want change, and their resolve was symbolized by the courage of this 37-year-old former schoolteacher.

Although the official count claimed that Lukashenko had won outright in the first round with 80 percent of the vote, few saw the results as credible. Tsikhanouskaya in turn claimed victory based on several exit polls, one with 85,000 respondents. On election night, Minsk was cordoned off, and the army and police used tear gas and rubber bullets against a crowd of more than 100,000 people that gathered to protest the official results. Over 1,300 were arrested and hundreds were hospitalized after clashes throughout the night. More protests followed.

Lukashenko may still have the tools to stay in power, but he has lost the bond he once had with the public. The president abandoned his people to the pandemic, just as he lied to them about the lasting effects of Chernobyl. And he can no longer point to a thriving economy as compensation. Even Moscow's support, which used to be a given, is now uncertain; Lukashenko holds a weaker hand for negotiations with a Kremlin disinclined to continue subsidizing his regime. Although he has claimed another victory, it will be a bitter and hollow one. ■

On the Edge of Empires

PAMELA KYLE CROSSLEY

We understand a very small portion of the ways in which the great land empires of the early modern world shaped the present. As of, say, 1800, the Romanov, Qing, Mughal, and Ottoman conquest empires still controlled virtually all of Eurasia (where the world's wealth and population were concentrated) and nearly 70 percent of global wealth. By far the largest of these empires in space was Romanov Russia (1613–1917), which claimed over half of all Eurasian surface area. The second-largest empire, Qing China (1636–1912), covered slightly more than a third of the Russian area. But it encompassed the world's most populous society and its largest and most influential economy—larger, in relation to global gross domestic product at the time, than China's share today.

Both empires were, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the process of rapid expansion—the Romanov primarily eastward toward the Pacific, the Qing primarily westward toward Central Asia. The border between them ran for approximately 7,500 miles, the longest border between land empires in history. For most of its length, it was sparsely populated and poorly fortified. This was an example of the striking differences between the strategic and economic structures of the great land empires and the rising sea empires: While the latter selected fairly contained targets of resource acquisition or commercial profit, on virtually any continent, the former were obliged to occupy and periodically defend continuous expanses that were often unprofitable. In this case, the tea and wool routes of Mongolia, the mineral and timber resources of Siberia, and access to Asia's northern Pacific coast were the targets, with long reaches of mountains, steppe, and tundra in between.

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Beyond the Steppe Frontier
by Sören Urbansky
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Strategically sensitive locations saw repeated conflict. Cossacks exploring, warring, and negotiating for Russia established forts, or *ostrog*, at critical points. Qing imperial troops, the Bannermen, set up their own establishments facing them (usually across the Argun or Amur rivers), in order to protect not only Mongolia but the Qing homeland in Manchuria. Over time, fortification and counter-fortification defined a porous but discernible boundary. The treaties of Nerchinsk (1689) and Kyakhta (1727) were footings for a remarkable diplomatic relationship on equal terms between the two empires. The Qing's greater relative military and economic strength drew Mongolia, the eastern Argun and Amur river system, and the Pacific coast north of Korea inside its borders.

This coexistence was rewritten rather abruptly in the mid-nineteenth century, as Russia abandoned its relationship with China and joined forces with the Europeans and America in the “unequal” treaties that were initiated after Britain's Opium War with the Qing (1839–41). By shrewd maneuvering in two separate treaties following the British defeat of the Qing in the “Second” Opium War of 1856–58, Russia finally took the Pacific coast, leading to the creation of the Primorskii Krai—the Maritime Province—and the founding of a new port, Vladivostok, which despite its connections to Siberia remains the most southerly of Russia's large cities. Southern Siberia and the Pacific coast became an international magnet for land developers and brokers drawn by its natural bounty of timber and precious metals. American engineers and entrepreneurs moved from Russia's new Pacific coast inland, laying telegraph cables and prospecting for gold, as George Kennan the elder related in his best seller of 1876, *Tent Life in Siberia*.

Sören Urbansky, a research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington, in previous publications has established himself as an expert on the history of the Argun region and

railway development in Northeast Asia. In *Beyond the Steppe Frontier*, he uses the story of the development of this region under the Romanov empire and the Soviet Union to demonstrate the impact that the world's longest border had on Eurasia.

The strands of the story are complex. They lay partly in the drift of Mongolia from a Qing territory into Russian dominance after 1917, and finally to the establishment of its own independent state in 1989; partly in the history of Russia's administration of the traditional populations of Argun after its acquisition of these territories in the late nineteenth century; partly in the development of railroads, anchored by the great Trans-Siberian, and related industries of mining, financing, building, and travel; and partly in the fraught relationships between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union, which impeded the advancement of industry and sporadically raised the threat of prolonged military conflict. Russian fears, dating back to Romanov times, dwelled on the possibility that China's huge population would inevitably lead to some undermining of Russian control through migration, economic infiltration, or even outright military assault.

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Instead of stopping with an examination of the large-scale strategic, economic, or environmental dynamics, Urbansky looks at the region's history from the vantage point of the border communities themselves, particularly those in the inland region where railroads, mining, timber, and local trade shaped life under the constraints of imperial occupation and governance. Many of them were linked by the Trans-Siberian Railroad (TSR) and its eastward extension, the Chinese Eastern Railway.

Manzhouli, the town that dominates the narrative, started out at the turn of the twentieth century as a railway stop at the border of Russia and China. Its name came from a Russian reference to its being the first eastward TSR stop in Manchuria, and the Russians had authority over its administration under the terms of an 1896 treaty. Siberian natives frequented the stop, bringing lead, furs, and other goods; Mongols brought their herds and camped outside the station in their yurts; Chinese merchants bought and sold in the open-air markets; and Russians ran the trains, the station, and customs inspections.

But Manzhouli, as it transformed into a place distinct from the railroad itself, came ostensibly under the governance of Qing China, while the TSR sidings and warehouses to the north became the Russian village of Otpor, modern Zabaikalsk. This tiny area served as a laboratory in border-building as the Romanov and Qing empires came to an end and tentative republics took their place. In the earliest years of Manzhouli and Otpor, the only authority on the ground was the TSR (which had one of its usual palatial stations at Manzhouli), with its administrators and security forces. This reflected the ambiguous and largely unanswered questions of border administration in the larger region of Hulunbeir (Hulunbuir), the northeastmost extension of Inner Mongolia. Both were claimed by Qing China and subsequently by the Republic of China, but in practice were left to Russian administration.

In its first decade, Manzhouli was buffeted by waves of Mongolian and Buryat nationalism, as Mongolia moved toward formal independence. In 1910–11, as revolution broke out in central China

and Mongolia declared independence, a plague was left completely unmanaged by the Qing government, and Russian transport officials imposed a quarantine on Chinese residents and travelers.

As the Nationalist Republic of China (ROC) began to take shape in the north, it established some epidemic monitoring, strengthening the previously weak Chinese administration of the Manzhouli environs.

A brief incursion by Mongol nationalists in 1914 led the ROC to clarify and to some extent fortify its position in Manzhouli and Hulunbeir generally. The Chinese military and administrative presence in the region was slightly augmented in response to a resumption of the conflict in 1920. The ROC, with increasing firmness, demanded that its jurisdiction over Manzhouli be acknowledged and that the Russian railway services move north to what was more clearly Russian territory at Zabaikalsk.

On the Russian side, after the revolutions of 1917 (and the creation in 1921 of the Mongolian People's Republic), struggles between Bolsheviks and those resisting the revolution pervaded Mongolia and Siberia—and drove Russian resisters into Manchuria. Manzhouli was stuck in the middle, newly fortified and monitored, as were Chita, Vladivostok, and other towns of the east.

Even now, the area remains under careful surveillance by both Russia and China.

The Chinese military governors of Manchuria—Zhang Zuolin until his assassination in 1928, then his son Zhang Xueliang—attempted to gain control of the Chinese Eastern Railway. In 1929, the younger Zhang went to war against the Russians. The Soviet Union, mounting its first large military engagement, forced Zhang to sign a protocol affirming its control of the railway. The critical function of railway infrastructure in the maintenance or disintegration of national border integrity was further demonstrated by the encroachment from the south of Japan's Southern Manchuria Railway (SMR).

Rapidly industrializing Japan had its own ambitions in Northeast Asia, and in the early decades of the twentieth century it laid its imperial foundations through the SMR. In 1931, Japanese military and industrial activists effected a coup against Zhang Xueliang, and Manchuria soon came under their control with the creation of the Manchukuo puppet state in 1932. During Japanese occupation, the importance of Hulunbeir, and Manzhouli in particular, to the management of communications, industrial resources, and defenses against Russian incursion led to some development of the town's mining and transport facilities, and its emergence as a security outpost intended to curtail smuggling and spying.

Following the defeat of Japan in 1945, the civil war in China left Manzhouli neglected for a few years. But with consolidation of PRC control over Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, the new Chinese state quickly built on the incipient Japanese industrialization of Manzhouli, making it central to regional coal exploitation.

Since World War II, recurrent tensions between Moscow and Beijing over Mongolia and border security have increased the relative military and surveillance burdens of the Hulunbeir region. Yet local life goes on, and Manzhouli continues in its traditional role as a market node for wool, dairy, felt, and other steppe products. The town hosts the Mongol annual spring festival (*nadam*) as if the past century and a half had not quite occurred.

LOCKING UP THE FRONTIER

Chinese and Russian border building and mutual suspicion left Manzhouli isolated from the main roads of urban development, as Urbansky narrates in vivid detail. He shows how the placement of traditional market kiosks by Chinese and Russian merchants kept them all active

together but still separate. Smuggling (primarily opium, gold, pearls, and tobacco) and its sibling industry of intelligence were also parts of a richly diverse cross-border world. That world thrived in profitable Russian–Chinese–Buryat partnership from the 1880s to the 1930s, but was sharply constrained from the 1930s on, as first Japanese and then Russian and Chinese border authorities tightened their grip on both contraband and spies.

Manzhouli's location made it a sort of capital city for refugees. This was representative of the Argun border generally. Urbansky provides accounts of prominent Mongol political refugees, led by Tokhtogo, attempting to enter Russia in 1908; waves of Russian, Cossack, and Buryat refugees trying to enter China or Japanese-occupied Manchuria to escape Soviet collectivization or persecution in the 1930s; and refugees from famine occasionally arriving from both north and south. Adventurers also were not in short supply. When Manzhouli's first representative council was formed in 1908, it included "one hundred seventy-five Russians, thirty-six Chinese, eight Turks, and one German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, and American each."

Urbansky warns the reader that Russian materials are more accessible than Chinese sources because the PRC regards borders and cultural minorities as sensitive and often classified subjects. His use of Chinese archives is nevertheless good, and his use of Chinese secondary scholarship very good, which is a boon to the reader. Russian scholarship on Siberia and Manchuria was rich throughout the twentieth century, whereas English-language scholarship on Northeast Asia withered in the later part of the century. Soviet historians working under G. V. Melikhov (who for some reason is omitted from this volume) led the historiographical war over Russian and Chinese claims to Northeast Asia that followed the border skirmishes between the USSR and the PRC in 1969.

The slight imbalance in perspective is most striking in the brevity of Urbansky's treatment of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and the struggle for Mongolia, and total lack of interest in the SMR as a comparison for the competing Russian and Chinese railways. Urbansky somewhat slighted Chinese and English scholarship that has intensively traced Japanese progress in the 1930s through Manchuria, eastern Mongolia, and northern China. Instead he focuses on Manzhouli and its less traumatic experience of Japanese

occupation. Overall, the book is a wonderful study of border development around Manzhouli in the twentieth century, and less of a comprehensive history of the border, either by period or by theme.

In contemporary historiography, “frontiers” have become a preoccupation, with a sense that they were not merely the peripheries of some central economic and cultural wellspring but were actually in a mutually transformative interaction with the center. *Beyond the Steppe Frontier* shows something else. The dispute between China and Russia over the Argun border was not resolved until 1995; even now, the area remains under

careful surveillance by both countries, each of which is also wary of American interference.

Despite its location at the nexus of Russia and China, of Mongolia and Manchuria, and of the Trans-Siberian and Chinese Eastern railways, the prevailing historical forces have made Manzhouli’s story one of alienation, isolation, and limitation. Today it is a small city of 150,000 people, and Zabaikalsk has 11,000 at most. As Urbansky says in a chapter title, this is “an open steppe under lock and key.” In the long run, the magnificent border between two unsettled empires produced a history of wariness and diminution. ■