

**The Center of Russian Studies,
Tel Aviv University**

1st Annual Report

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1. Address by Professor Itai Sened



Academic Director

Dean Emeritus, the Gershon H. Gordon Faculty of Social Sciences, Tel Aviv University

Due to changing trends in the social sciences, Russian Studies have experienced some decline in the first two decades of the 21st century.

Yet, current geo-political evolutions have raised considerable academic and practical interest in this field of research.

With the help and initiative of Dr. Anatoly B. Chubays, Tel Aviv University has responded to this reemergence of interest by opening the Center for Russian Studies.

Over the first year of its life, we have had significant success in recruiting five renowned experts in the field who set up a clear academic agenda that this report is mostly dedicated to outline and expand upon

The center sponsored two significant academic workshops at IIASA in Vienna and at the Hoover Institute on the campus of Stanford University in California.

In the coming year our goal is to further expand our academic activities in three directions:

1. Our research fellows are working hard at pursuing the academic research outlined in this report and getting some of it published in major academic outlets.
2. We are working towards establishing an MA program in Russian Studies, jointly with the Free University of Berlin
3. The Center will continue to expand its outreach through workshops, lectures and other academic activities to further the knowledge of this important field of research.

This report was prepared by an international team of scholars from the Center for Russian Studies at Tel Aviv University, consisting of:

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We call upon all those who are interested to follow our publications, activities and pursuit of knowledge that we will continue to communicate through our website:

<https://en-social-sciences.tau.ac.il/news/crs-at-tau> and other public and private outlets.

2. Mission and purpose of the project

The goal of the project is to develop scenarios for Russia's development up to 2040. To achieve this goal, the authors conduct a multidisciplinary study of Russia's modern history from 1991 to the present. The proposed study is based on the following basic axiomatic assumptions.

1. Forecasts must be based on understanding the mechanisms preceding transformations.
2. Four arenas of interest: economy, culture, politics and society - have a high degree of autonomy.
3. The project logic - disciplinary research logic in separate axes combined with an interdisciplinary approach - fit current stage of development of area studies and will contribute to their development through the development of specific interdisciplinary models based on dialog across disciplines with their specific apparatuses
4. The project does not aim at an eclectic combination of concepts from different fields to describe its empirical object more fully. Similarly, we refuse to go to the opposite extreme of bringing all heterogeneous phenomena, from culture, politics, economics and social life to a common denominator of a single explanatory model.
5. The models we aim to produce of the transformation of Russian society, economy, culture and politics are not molds of Russian reality and are not part of it. None of the selected variables, whether dynamically conceptualized structures of social relations or relatively stable patterns of value orientations, are intended solely to describe Russian specifics.

Project Ethics. As researchers in their scientific communities and their disciplines, the authors are committed to avoid evaluative judgments and political engagement. The project does not have the task of reinterpreting the past and drawing lessons for the future. Our goal is to identify stable and reproducible causal links, analyze the social, political, cultural and economic mechanisms of transformation for the subsequent construction of possible scenarios for Russia's future.

The project is planned for five years and will be implemented in the following phases and subphases, according to the timeframes outlined in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Timeline for the development of project phases

Project phases and subphases	Tentative dates
Phase 1: Multidisciplinary Study of Russia's Modern History	March 2024 - December 2026
1.1. Development of the methodological basis for multidisciplinary research of the modern history of Russia	March 2024 - December 2024
1.2. Multidisciplinary study of Russia's modern history	January 2025 - December 2026
Phase 2: Development of scenarios for Russia's development up to 2040	January 2027 - December 2028

This report focuses on the first subphase of the first phase of the projects.

3. Research

Four endogenous axes were chosen as the main directions of the study: economy, sociology, culture, politics, supplemented by exogenous axes of foreign policy and the environment. A central task of the study is to identify interrelations and interdependencies across these axes. Understanding the logic of their development and interaction and identifying stable cause-and-effect relationships between them can contribute to the study of the past and provide tools for understanding probable scenarios of the future.

The authors intend to form a chronology of development in each of these four directions. This will allow us to analyze the unfolding of events in time along each of the axes: economic, social, cultural, political and foreign policy transformations; highlight the main stages of development; Justify and analyze the transition points from one stage to the next; identify the internal logic of those developments along each axis; Identify inter-axis relationships, including significant variables across multiple axes, searching for paired variables and conceptual compatibility of variables across and between axes and identify the presence, or absence, of time lags in causal relationships, both within and between axes, and, if quantify such lags if they exist. On this basis, we hope to propose interdisciplinary explanatory models.

When conducting research on each axis, we use methodological tools developed in that specific field, using disciplinary tools to describe the processes within the axis. Key research questions for each area and research plans for 2025 are listed below.

3.1 Axes

Transformation of economic institutions

The two main research questions are:

- How did institutional dynamics determine the dynamics of standard macro indicators in the Russian economy in 1991-2024?

Macro-dynamics of indicators in practice depends not only on the quality of institutions in the economy and their changes. Basic macroeconomic processes have their own logic, determined by earlier decisions and objective factors. Therefore, we need to define these processes and then analyze what in the residual we refer to as institutional dynamics and how we explain the relationship between institutional changes and the dynamics of this "residual".

- What were the main decisions made during the period under study in state regulation, budgetary and monetary policies that influenced institutional development and dynamics of macroeconomic indicators?

Who made these decisions - what concepts, within what ideologies, guided the groups that directly made the decisions or actively influenced them? What does the timeline of these decisions look like, and what indicators can we use to determine the scale of events to create the timeline? The broader, non-exhaustive list of research questions presented below is partly related to the prospect of finding inter-axis mutualisms:

1. How did the processes of economic stabilization, technological transfer, labor market adaptation and changes in foreign trade conditions mutually influence each other during the period under study?
2. How long did it take to stabilize the price system after its collapse in the late Soviet economy? At what point can we confidently speak about the stable economic and institutional development of the Russian Federation [RF] in the stationary mode? How did the starting stationary institutional structure in the RF look like at different times?
3. What was the dynamics of transaction costs in the RF economy and how did it influence the dynamics of macro indicators?

4. What external shocks influenced the realization of the main trends in the economy of the Russian Federation in the period under study?
5. Which main interest groups in economic exchange influenced regulatory decisions in the described period? What economic resources did they possess? How do these groups relate to the groups distinguished by political science analysis for the same period? Were there groups whose resources cannot be classified as economic, but who influenced decision-making? Were the institutions of electoral democracy at different times relevant to these decisions - i.e. were households and their direct interests included in the process?
6. Is the impact of cultural shifts since 1991 on the institutional structure in the economy of the RF significant? What cultural constraints did the current state of values and worldview positions impose on the actions of groups influencing the adoption of significant regulatory decisions?
7. How did tax redistribution in the Russian economy change - and how did changes in tax policy and tax payment practices affect institutional development and macro-indicators? Did the amount of social redistribution in different periods affect institutional and economic development? How did this redistribution affect the composition of the entrepreneurial corps and economic activity?
8. Were there synchronous exogenous and endogenous shocks during this period? Did external shocks change the rules of the internal game? How did foreign trade specialization of the Russian economy change during this period and does it matter for the main issues we are discussing?
9. Did the peculiarities of formation of the RF international investment position in different periods influence institutional and economic development? In another formulation - are the accumulated exports and imports of capital in the RF significant for the nature of decision-making?
10. What are the current perceptions in the main groups of influence about the possible prospects for the development of the Russian economy and its institutional environment? How do these perceptions limit the range of further decisions that can affect further economic and institutional development?

Transformation of Social Ties and Social Capital.

Main Research Objective:

- Testing empirical relationships between three sets of conceptual variables: "social ties - collective perceptions - behavioral strategies".

A preliminary non-exhaustive list of research questions:

1. How does an increase in social ties affect political mobilization? Preliminary analysis shows that social capital is correlated with the probability of participation in political actions and membership in political associations. At the same time, with no connection with the nature of activity - protest and pro-governmental actions were attended by people with more social contacts. Does disintegration of social ties lead to depoliticization?
2. Is there a correlation between political attitudes - "pro-Western / anti-Western", "revolutionary / conservative", "progressive / anti-progressive", "market / anti-market" - and the structure of social contacts?
3. Is there a stable relationship between emigration strategies and social capital?
4. Is there a stable relationship between psychological characteristics such as locus of control, level of optimism, level of subjective well-being) and social capital?
5. Which specific strategies of economic behavior are conditioned on social capital?

6. Is there a correlation between divorce and suicide statistics and social bond transformation scenarios?

7. What role do educational institutions play in the reproduction of social capital? At the moment, there are empirical grounds to believe that school differentiation is one of the factors leading to tribalization.

8. What impact did technological innovations - the emergence of cell phones, spread of mobile Internet, "messenger revolution" - have on the structure of social ties in each of the periods?

9. How do interpersonal and institutional trust relate in each period indicated?

10. How does trust in authority related to the amount and nature of social capital?

This study is based on a meta-analysis of databases collected between 1991 and 2025.

Qualitative data of in-depth interviews will be used as an auxiliary channel of information to adjust hypotheses and search for explanatory mechanisms.

This methodological architecture of the survey imposes a number of serious limitations. It means that we can use for analysis only those indicators that were previously included in the surveys and only those that underwent cross-validation procedures.

Transformation of the Cultural Environment

Main Research Objective:

Identify forms and ways of mutual influence of four variables of transformation through culture: narratives, institutions, practices, technologies.

Instrumental tasks:

- Formulate and test hypotheses about processes that took place in Soviet/post-Soviet/Russian culture in the last 40 years.

- Explore the research question: is it true that culture during this period influenced economic and political decisions and influenced collective perceptions?

- Identify performance criteria and formulate hypotheses on the relationship between cultural policies, funding, dominant perceptions across groups, and collective perceptions.

- Audit databases, determine which quantitative studies are promising.

- Identify a set of "key texts of the epoch" and "nests of interconnected texts" that define narratives, connected practices and institutions - a text is understood as any format - from cinema to books and from symbolic markings of urban environments to games.

A preliminary non-exhaustive list of research questions:

Theoretical:

1. Which social narratives in the described period may be considered significant, secondary, or marginal: what are the selection criteria, quantitative and qualitative.

2. How and in which periods the polyphony of narratives was provided, in which periods and for what reasons the dominant pattern emerged.

3. What cultural practices prevailed in the periods of: 1987-1993, 1993-1999, 2000-2014, 2014-present, and how to classify them.

4. What technological shifts influenced practices and narratives, and are these shifts all about communications, multimedia, transmedia and what follows

5. Explore the role of content production and distribution technologies in creative industries.

6. What groups influenced the production of public narratives during these periods. What role individual intellectuals played in the overall processes.

7. What are the peaks and recessions of transformation processes in culture? How and by what criteria do they correlate with the ups and downs in other axes of the research.

Practical:

8. How do business and government investments in the production/discreditation of cultural matrices, ideological metaphors, and the emergence/disappearance of institutions correlate with shifts in societal orientations.

9. To what extent cultural and educational policies influence transformation through culture.

10. Propaganda as a Narrative Format: Shifting metaphors in political advertising of electoral cycles: Who decides and how? How matching password, or word encoding affect political future? Gorky Park, Zaryadye Park and Patriot Park as a Competition of Ideologies.

11. Is it correct to assume that digital technologies in post-Soviet culture have become a systemic form of promoting traditionalism; if so, what are the reasons?

The methodological architecture of our research plan is complicated by the heterogeneity of the underlying data at different points in history. During Perestroika we are limited to data on growth/decline in circulation, growth/decline in movie and theater ticket sales. In more recent times, databases are more expansive.

Transformation of the Political Environment.

We describe the Russian regime as a product of interactions among elite groups. The object of the study is to better understand the **transformations of the political regime as a product of the relationships between elite groups.**

Principal Research Question:

- How elite groups with agency power interrupt trends and changes in the political regime, zigzag changes of course and transformations of revolutionary scale? For this purpose, we must understand the composition of groups that influenced Russian politics, and their strategic interaction and relations with each other.

The subject of the research is not the history of political institutions but how elite groups acquired agency by virtue of possessing administrative, financial and symbolic resources.

Research questions in this subject matter are the following:

1. What turning points in relationship among elite groups led to regime transformations?
2. How did individual and group agents act in different periods in Russian politics?
3. How did the composition of these groups change, which of them and for what reasons lost and gained positions of power?
4. What was the position of these groups on the axes of electability-non-electability?
5. How did the groups' collective perceptions change?
6. What strategies and tactics did they use at different stages to achieve their goals and how did these goals change over time?

The research relies on quantitative and qualitative methods and data. Attention to collective representations and narratives implies the use of methods such as text as data with sentiment analysis - analysis of tone and emotional characteristics of statements, as well as topic modeling and dictionary approach. Shifting narratives, vocabulary, and tonality will help us identify periods, turning points, and non-homeomorphic, discontinuous events.

The boundaries of elite groups and coalitions of power agents are defined by resource boundaries of power brokers, businessmen, bureaucrats, public intellectuals, but in many cases by collective perceptions that unite resource-diverse groups.

The analysis will identify moments of rupture in political narratives, are they related to changes in the composition of the set of elite groups, or only to changes in goals of existing coalitions of elite groups, or to changes in their strategies and relations with each other.

Transformation of foreign policy environment as an exogenous factor

Key research questions:

- How have the foreign policy perceptions of Russian society and key political groups changed over thirty years of Russian history?

- How did significant events on the foreign policy axis affect the domestic policy axis and, by consequence, the other axes?

Answering these questions requires answering a number of subsidiary questions:

1. What does the "timeline" of key foreign policy events look like for Russia?
2. What were key concepts used by Russian players to interpret foreign policy events: the concepts of security and normality are likely to play key roles.
3. Which foreign policy perceptions were perceived as "consensus," and which, in turn, were the subject of competition between different narratives?
4. How did foreign policy events influence the dynamics of foreign policy perceptions?
5. How did foreign policy events affect the resources and legitimacy of political groups?
6. How did the behavior or influence of these groups change due to foreign policy events?
7. How was the structure of Russian politics influenced by the "foreign policy axis"?
8. What changes occurred on the other axes under the influence of foreign policy-motivating decisions of political groups?

We argue that the best approach to analyze "foreign policy axes" combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The methodological architecture of our analysis includes three elements:

1. **A quantitative component** aims to determine the foreign policy perceptions existing in Russia and influencing the perception of events on the foreign policy axis. The latter can be investigated using two tools: (a) public opinion polls and (b) analysis of foreign policy narratives. The analysis of survey data is, however, auxiliary for us, since we will be less interested in the perceptions of the Russian population, and more in the perceptions of various elite groups and "players" on the political axis, due to the organization of Russian politics. We plan to focus on analyzing the main foreign policy narratives existing in Russian society and in Russian politics, their dynamics and transformation and rely on a set of text-as-data methods. Our analysis involves the use of three tools: (a) dictionary approach: determining the frequency of occurrence of a number of predetermined terms and formulations in the corpus of texts; (b) topic modeling: the main "topics" of communication about the "outside world"; and (c) sentiment analysis: the general "tone" of communication (positive/negative) about certain foreign policy players (countries). Analysis (a) and (b) should be carried out also in relation to individual countries (groups of countries, organizations, such as the EU or NATO).

The result of the quantitative analysis should be the construction of time series describing foreign policy perceptions based on narrative and survey data, as well as the identification of "structural breaks" in them, indicating fundamental changes in these narratives.

2. The next step of our analysis is to **identify key events on the foreign policy axis**: e (a) those associated with structural breaks in the dynamics of narratives, where significant changes in narratives occurs or (b) events that play a key role in the narratives - that is, events that are "frequently referred to" by the players in their communication about the outside world. The topic modeling and sentiment analysis methods are well suited to identify key events associated with structural breaks. The Dictionary approach help identify key events, systematically referenced by players.
3. The last step of our analysis uses **qualitative methods** to identify what changes in the structure and organization of the political, economic policy and foreign policy axes were brought about by certain significant events. In this case we plan to use process tracing methods, trying to identify the effects of external changes.

We will also try to understand whether the actions of players are related to purely foreign policy goals, or, on the contrary, foreign policy is used to achieve domestic political goals.

3.2 Expected results of the next sub-phase of the work

Results of the past sub-stage

At present, **the stage of development of the methodological basis for the interdisciplinary study of the modern history of Russia has been completed**:

1. Cartography of the current state of the research field, relevant approaches, literature review.
2. Selection of the theoretical framework of the study, development of conceptualization.
3. Preliminary selection of key conceptual variables of the study.
4. Formulation of hypotheses (three types: timeline, intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary).
5. Operationalization: preliminary selection of potentially relevant empirical indicators.
6. Writing a report on the first part of the study.
7. Discussion of the report in the professional community.
8. Replenishment of partial of the list of available databases.

The next step of the work

The next stage of work - a **multidisciplinary study of the modern history of Russia** - will be aimed at the specification and verification of the formulated hypotheses on the 4 endogenous axes +1 exogenous axes, as well as the identification of interrelationships between them. The timeframe of the stage is January 2025 - December 2026.

The work will include the following main tasks:

1. Formation of a full-fledged empirical base of the study on the axes.

First, these are the results of various sociological studies, as well as the analysis of large arrays of texts as data.

2. Verification of timeline hypotheses and final timeline generation for each axis.
3. Clarification and specification of the main research questions, the answer to which is necessary to work with the data and to verify the hypotheses. Research questions are specified on all axes (endogenous and exogenous).
4. Hypothesis work in each of the five areas including:
 - Verification of "axial" hypotheses based on databases.
 - Refinement of "axial" hypotheses based on discussions.
 - Confirmation or rejection of hypotheses.

5. Based on the hypothesis verification work performed, a final "package" of intra- and inter-axis hypotheses and parameters required for their verification should be formulated.
6. Testing the inter-axis hypotheses.
 - Identification of quantitative and qualitative parameters needed to verify cross-sector hypotheses.
 - Identifying and analyze inter-axial causal relationships.
 - Conduct a series of "inter-axis discussions" on the results of verification.
 - Attempt to form a unified timeline or a "truncated-unified" timeline, relying on the dynamics of the individual axes.
 - **Form a holistic model of Russia's recent history based on the identified cause-and-effect relationships**, verification of the possibilities of its use as a methodological basis for Phase 2 "Development of scenarios of Russia's development in the perspective up to 2040".
7. The team labors to submit a number of academic publications. Publication topics can be either "single-axis" or integrating issues related to two or more axes. The latter is of particular interest for the project objectives and methodology.

4. Seminars

Current research results are discussed during scientific seminars.

Three consecutive workshops were held at (1) International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Vienna in June, 2024, (2) Stanford University in January 2025, and (3) Tel Aviv University in February/March 2025.

At each seminar, the Center presented a report on the results of the already conducted research. There were wide discussions on the presented reports, the participants asked very sharp questions, which demonstrated the involvement of the scientific community in three very different locations with three very different academic groups, and their interest in the ongoing work on the topics of our Center. The overall results of the discussions at each of the events were positive.

In June 2024, the Center held a seminar in IASA. The Center has agreed with the Institute on cooperation in the development of joint research projects and data exchange.



5. Russian Studies master's program

The Center for Russian Studies is developing a master's program.

The Russian studies track will include 5 semester-long courses and 1 semester-long seminar. Students could choose between studying the full track or taking only one or two courses from the track as electives. Students from the Free University in Berlin (Frie or FUB), Germany who completed the first year of a similar program at FUB will have to choose all six courses. For others, these courses are elective.

It is planned to train 20 students per year.

The proposed program includes courses in four areas:

- Russian Society and its Transformation (from 1991 to the Present);
- Russian Economy Before and After 2022;
- Evolution of the Russian Political Regime;
- Russian Culture: Narratives and Worldviews.

These four areas are presented in the structure of the CRS and related to our research areas. They are also complementary to the structure of the Master's program in Russian Studies at FUB.

Intended learning outcomes are:

- Students will be able to analyze, understand and explain Russian politics, economics, society and culture based on relevant academic theories and methodologies.
- Students will demonstrate an in-depth ability to analyze and apply various subject-specific concepts and theories in the area of Russian Studies.
- Students will approach their studies as exercises within an interdisciplinary field. As such, they will learn to see the interconnectedness between the various disciplines within Russian (and broader - area) studies.
- Students will be able to present well-informed and independently framed knowledge overviews and give an account of the state of research in a specific subject area in Russian and Eurasian studies.
- Students will be able to identify and define the scope of empirically relevant material in Russian studies and work on it analytically in an in-depth research task (thesis).