

# 2nd Annual brief report

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**The Center for  
Russian Studies**

The Gershon H. Gordon  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Tel Aviv University



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## 2026

A brief report of the Center for Russian Studies at Tel Aviv University. It provides a concise overview of the Center's organizational activities and key developments during 2025. The report is intended as a brief administrative and strategic summary. A comprehensive academic (full) report, prepared in accordance with Tel Aviv University regulations, has been compiled and circulated separately.

The previous annual report of the Center is available at: <https://crs.tau.ac.il/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/AnnualReport2024.pdf>

### **International group of scholars:**

Aleksander Arkhangelsky, PhD in Philology, Senior Researcher at Tel Aviv University.

Aleksander Baunov, Visiting Researcher at the Carnegie Center (Berlin).

Dmitry Butrin, Researcher at Tel Aviv University.

Yohanan Gurevich, PhD in History, Senior Researcher at the Tel Aviv University.

Aleksander Libman, PhD in Economics, Professor of Russian and Eastern European Politics at the Free University of Berlin.

Victor Vakhshayn, PhD in Sociology, Senior Researcher at Tel Aviv University.

Nicolai Shpilkov, Research Assistant at Tel Aviv University.

Oksana Stanevich, Research Assistant at Tel Aviv University

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	1
<b>Key results</b>	<b>4</b>
Economic Axis	5
Social Axis	8
Cultural Axis	10
Political Axis	11
Foreign Policy Axis	12
<b>Inter-Axis Hypotheses</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Symposium</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Other activities</b>	<b>16</b>

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## Key results

In 2025, the Center for Russian Studies at Tel Aviv University produced its second annual brief report, reflecting a shift from building a methodological framework (sub-stage 1.1) to systematic empirical analysis and structured comparison of results (sub-stage 1.2).

The project is planned for five years and will be implemented in the following stages and sub-stages, with the following deadlines:

Table 1. Project stage development deadlines

Project stages and sub-stages	Approximate deadlines
Stage 1. Interdisciplinary research on the recent history of Russia	March 2024 – December 2026
Sub-stage 1.1. Development of a methodological framework for interdisciplinary research into the recent history of the RF,	March 2024 – December 2024
Substage 1.2. Research into the recent history of the RF,; timelines and development of intra-disciplinary and interdisciplinary hypotheses.	January 2025 – December 2025
Substage 1.3. Finalization and verification of intra-disciplinary and interdisciplinary hypotheses for their further use in scenario development.	January 2026 – December 2026
Stage 2. Development of scenarios for the development of the RF up to 2040	January 2027 – December 2028

The most important research outcome of 2025 was the development of empirically grounded timelines for each analytical axis, designed to move beyond scattered observations toward process-based, historically comparable periodizations. These timelines

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were built using mixed sources and methods and are intended to serve as a common platform for subsequent interdisciplinary modeling.

Below are the key findings organized by research axes.

### **Economic Axis**

The first academic result of this section is a three-sector interpretation of the 1990s economy, postulating the simultaneous coexistence of three autonomous regulatory regimes: the "old" sector, the "new" sector, and the sector of spontaneous commercialization. The inertial "old" sector, concentrated in heavy industry, mono-cities, and the military-industrial complex, operated under the logic of maintaining social stability and production chains at any cost, utilizing barter schemes and informal administrative arrangements as substitutes for scarce financial resources. In contrast, a market-oriented "new" sector emerged, including financial institutions, retail, and telecommunications; this sector initially aligned with global management standards, monetary settlements, and formal law. The third element was the sector of spontaneous commercialization—a mass of small entrepreneurship and self-employment that, possessing extreme flexibility, absorbed social shocks and provided the primary supply for the consumer market.

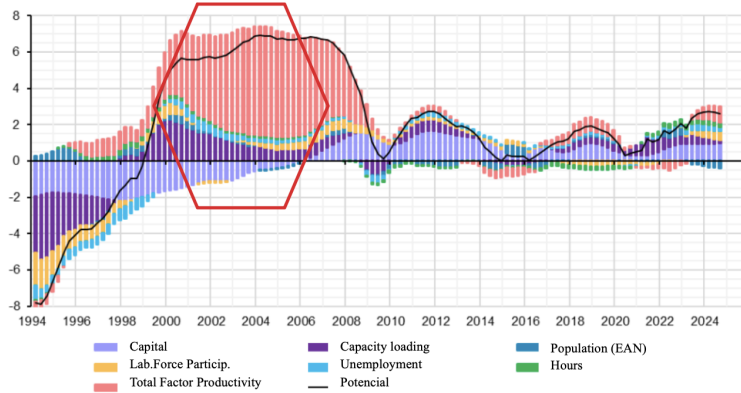
These sectors differed fundamentally in their mechanisms for exercising property rights, enforcing contractual obligations, and methods of mediation. Although economic agents could operate in different environments simultaneously, the transfer of rules and sanctioning mechanisms between sectors remained extremely limited, creating a state of deep institutional fragmentation.

Table 3. Presumed main characteristics of institutional sectors from 1991—2000

	"Old" sector	"New" sector	Spontaneous marketization sector
Typical source of ownership in the sector in early periods	State-owned/privatized	Newly created / Privatized	Newly created
Main sector of the economy	Industry	Financial services	Services, intermediation, trade
Contract discipline	Weaker	Average	Stronger
Enforcement of contracts	State	Private	Private
Regulatory discipline *	Stronger	Stronger	Weaker
Settlement system	Banks	Banks	Cash turnover
Preferred payment currency	Ruble	Hard currency	Ruble
Property standards	Transformed USSR standards	New and imported norms	Alternative norms
Sub-institution of bankruptcy	Partially functional	Not operational	Operational
Dependence on budget expenditures *	High	High	None
Acceptable transaction costs *	Higher	Higher	Below average
Organizational forms characteristic of players accepting "sector" norms	Enterprise / Production association	Group of companies	Individual / LLC

\*- relative to the average for the economy in this period

*Decomposition of GDP potential in the logic of the production function*

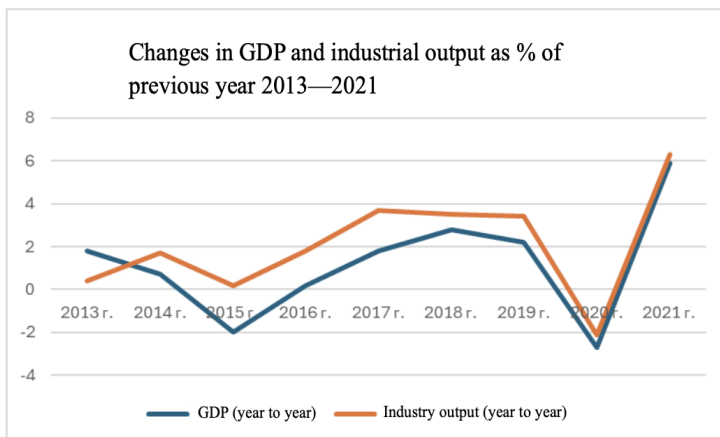


Source: (Babayan et al 2025)

The second research result concerns the convergence of these regimes in the 2000s. It is emphasized that the formation of a unified institutional environment was evolutionary and not the result of a single administrative decision. Convergence

occurred through the systemic alignment of incentives for market participants, the rapid development of financial services, and a consistent increase in the costs associated with evading general rules. Specifically, the reduction of opportunities for sustainable tax evasion became a critical factor in unification. The progressive narrowing of the space for "gray" practices deprived autonomous regimes of their economic base, forcing agents into a single legal field.

The third result identifies changes in the rules of large-scale asset ownership and the strengthening of the state's role as a permanent and dominant actor in the system. The study highlights the 2000–2004 period as a turning point: during this time, a series of precedent-setting decisions established new boundaries for what was permissible in the sphere of



Source: Rosstat

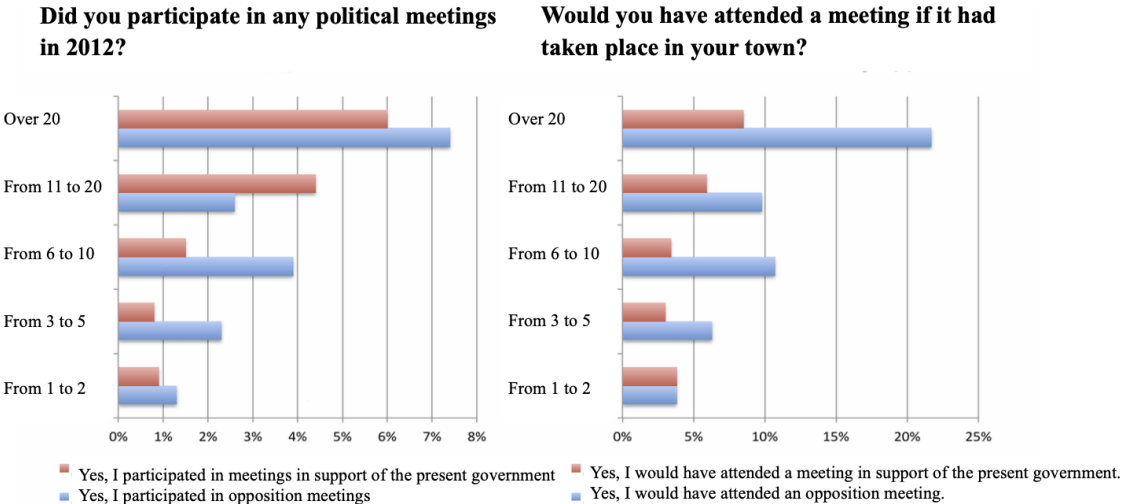
large-scale property. The state reaffirmed its status not merely as a regulator, but as an active participant defining ownership conditions in strategic sectors.

Ultimately, the economic section concludes that Russia's institutional space

transitioned from a collection of several isolated rule regimes to a more homogeneous environment. Nevertheless, the resulting space did not become entirely uniform: the environment formed in the 2000s retained elements originating from various 1990s regimes, predetermining its hybrid nature and specific resilience to external and internal challenges.

**Social Axis**

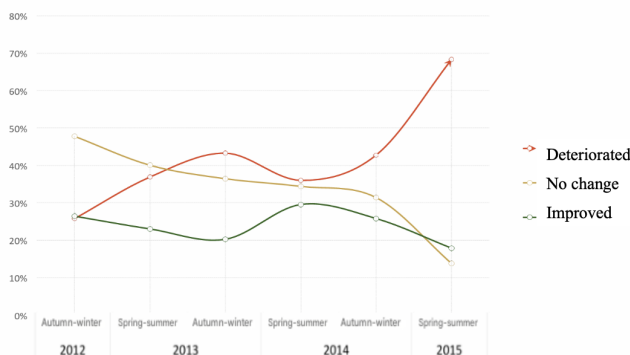
The core of the social component is an updated periodization of social ties and trust dynamics spanning three decades and divided into six key stages: from "avalanche-like atomization" (1990–1995) and subsequent "regeneration of weak ties" (1996–2002) to periods of "primitive accumulation of social capital" (2003–2011) and the peak of "grassroots solidarity" (2012–2017). The subsequent cycle is characterized by a transition toward "tribalization and atomization" (2018–2021), concluding with the current stage of "erosion of social capital and reconfiguration of interpersonal trust networks" (2022–present). This periodization reveals the non-linear nature of changes in the structure of Russian society, where phases of social decay were followed by restoration under various economic and political drivers, refuting the notion of a continuous and unidirectional destruction of the social fabric.



The second result confirms the link between accumulated social capital and political activity, with a crucial qualification regarding the "scalar" nature of this effect. The study shows that an increase in social ties, particularly "strong ties" (the inner circle), directly increases the likelihood of an individual participating in political action. However, this dependence is scalar: it determines the level of involvement and readiness for action but does not inherently set the substantive "direction" or vector of mobilization. Thus, developed social capital can serve as a resource for both protest activity and loyalist, pro-government mobilization. The report records this distinction as a difference between a scalar quantity (intensity of participation) and a vector quantity (political orientation).

The third result reveals a mechanism of competition between economic and political mobilization within the same trust networks. Contrary to early hypotheses that rising solidarity automatically leads to a simultaneous surge in all spheres of activity, the report indicates an inverse relationship. Shifting trusted networks into a mode of economic "actualization" (pragmatic use of ties for survival or business) leads to a weakening of their

potential for political use. The economic activation of groups is closely linked to processes of depoliticization, which became particularly evident at the 2017 turning point. This suggests that the resource of trust is finite: its use in one functional mode precludes its simultaneous deployment in another.



Eurobarometer: respondents on the economic situation in the country

The fourth result involves refining the interpretation of the 1990s as a period of total atomization. While the decade generally confirms this status, the analysis identifies a significant exception: in the middle of the decade, the decay of ties slowed, and after 1995, a regeneration of trust networks began. This phenomenon is interpreted as the first recorded stage of "economically motivated" solidarity, where the restoration of ties became a

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necessary condition for the population to adapt to market shocks. Thus, the atomization of the 1990s was not homogeneous but was interrupted by a phase of social capital recovery dictated by the logic of physical and economic survival.

The current stage of societal development, starting after 2022, is described as a combination of three parallel and divergent processes. On one hand, there is an erosion of weak ties leading to a new wave of atomization. On the other, partial tribalization (closing off into insular groups) is observed among strata that retained stable strong ties. Concurrently, the most vulnerable social groups are attempting to restore weak ties using mechanisms similar to the practices of the mid-to-late 1990s. This complex configuration suggests that interpersonal trust in contemporary Russia is entering a "survival mode," where the preservation and reassembly of networks become ways to minimize risk under conditions of high external uncertainty.

### **Cultural Axis**

The cultural study centers on the turn toward "archaization from above" as the dominant logic of cultural policy, which finalized after 2014. This transition was preceded by a long preparatory stage (2000–2014), marked by the state's return to the cultural sphere as an active "customer" of values and practices. During this period, a specific language of "spiritual security" was institutionalized, and symbolic acts like the adoption of the national anthem are interpreted as the beginning of a systemic course toward archaization. Against the backdrop of suppressed protest activity and the "Crimea syndrome," the ideology of "restoration" evolved into a policy of homogenizing the creative environment, implemented partly through tools such as "foreign agent" legislation. A significant contradiction is noted: while the management logic aims for unification, culture as a set of everyday practices seeks to maintain internal institutions of diversity and competition.

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The second result describes the 2020–2025 period as a stage of direct transmission of "war laws" into the cultural sphere and the establishment of a "dictatorship of traditional values." This stage is characterized by the appearance of direct propaganda in the official cultural layer and its fragmentary penetration into opposition discourse. This period features the final institutional consolidation of traditional values in federal strategies, accompanied by the mass emigration of the creative elite and the practice of forced "loyalty oaths" from remaining artists. Simultaneously, the cultural process maintains multi-vector characteristics, visible in street-level musical protest, indicating the resistance of "living culture" to total state regulation.

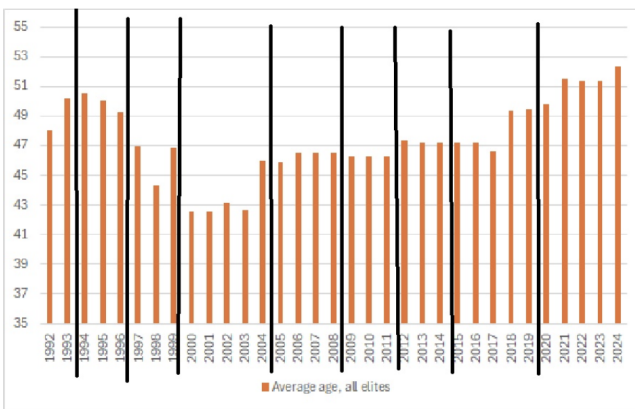
The third result raises the question of "scaling" foreign policy narratives within the cultural space and translating the language of foreign policy into cultural plots. It argues that foreign policy categories—normality, security, and injustice—find their upscaled versions in cultural concepts of normalization, return, sovereignty, and isolation. This allows cultural policy and foreign policy rhetoric to be viewed as parts of a single ideological process, where cultural narratives prepare the ground for foreign policy decisions, while foreign policy isolation, in turn, becomes the foundation for further archaization of the domestic cultural environment.

### **Political Axis**

The political component offers an extensive periodization of political change and elite structure, reconstructing transitions from the "collapse of the Perestroika coalition" in 1991 to the establishment of a "war regime" after 2022. The stages include: the "oligarchic republic" (1996–1999), the "collective Putin" period (2000–2004), the "authoritarian consensus" (2004–2008), the "liberal autocracy" of the Medvedev period (2008–2011), the "conservative" (2011–2014) and "anti-Western" (2014–2020) vectors, concluding with the "new state" (2020–2022) and the final consolidation of "war as the new political regime."

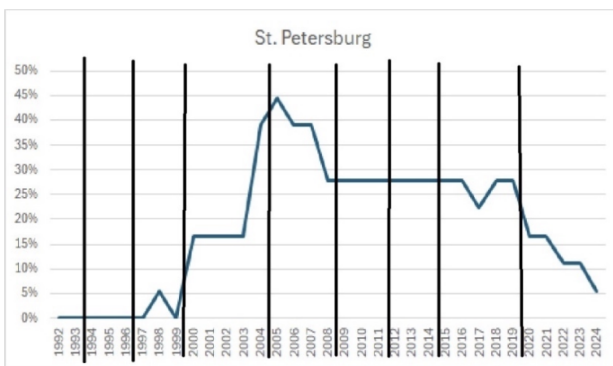
In this logic, regime change is explained not as a series of random catastrophic ruptures, but as the system's sequential adaptation to internal challenges by redistributing control resources. Each transition—from the "oligarchic republic" to the "authoritarian consensus"

and finally to the "new state"—was driven by the need to neutralize threats to the center's political monopoly. The driver of transformation is the gradual shift in the weight of formal institutions in favor of informal elite agreements. This allows the system to remain resilient, adjusting the "rules of the game" in response to resistance from regional elites, civil society, or external pressure. Thus, political history appears as a continuous process of fine-tuning survival mechanisms, where each new stage is a reactive response to the exhaustion of the previous model's control tools.



Age at the time of taking office by periods

The logic was to redistribute control in favor of more dependent, manageable actors lacking their own political base. This allowed the center to monopolize decision-making and radically shift the balance of power toward the executive vertical, turning potential competitors into functional executors.



The share of St. Petersburg native among top officials by periods

The second result interprets the first two presidential terms of the 2000s as a systemic attempt to build a "coalition of the weak." The study argues that the central aim was the deliberate restriction of the autonomy of strong alternative power centers—primarily large oligarchic groups and influential regional leaders ("heavyweight" governors). The

logic was to redistribute control in favor of more dependent, manageable actors lacking their own political base. This allowed the center to monopolize decision-making and radically shift the balance of power toward the executive vertical, turning potential competitors into functional executors. The third result applies the analytical framework of "autocratization by mistake" to describe the transformation of the political system. Unlike theories focusing on sudden coups, this approach analyzes the transition between democracy and autocracy as a relatively "smooth" and gradual process. The key role is played not

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by a single decisive event, but by the cumulative effect of tactical elite decisions aimed at maintaining stability, which ultimately led to a fundamental change in the regime type, often contrary to initial long-term declarations.

In summary, the political section concludes that the current state of the Russian system is the result of long-term institutional evolution, where each stage prepared the ground for a subsequent tightening of rules. The transition to "war as a regime" after 2022 is viewed not as a break from tradition, but as the ultimate expression of the logic of sovereignty and the suppression of alternatives established during the formation of the "coalition of the weak."

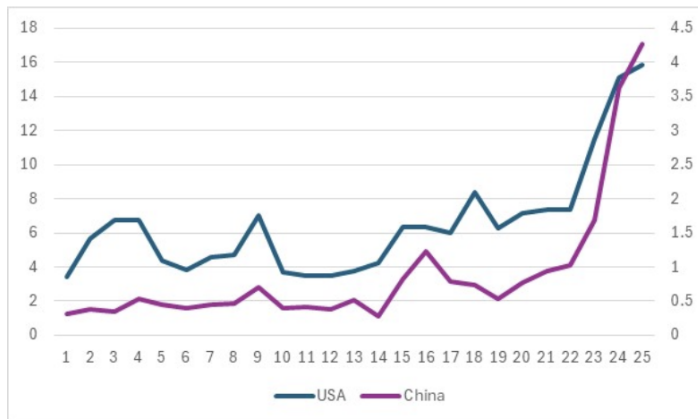
### **Foreign Policy Axis**

The foreign policy study reduces official and media rhetoric to three core narratives:

- Security: The external world as a permanent source of threats.
- Normality: The Western order as a benchmark, where events are evaluated by their proximity to or distance from this "norm."
- Injustice: A flawed world order dominated by a narrow group of countries that ignore the interests of other actors. This typology allows for the analysis of foreign policy not as a set of isolated decisions, but as a struggle between interpretive frameworks that define the limits of international interaction.

The second result identifies these narratives through stable linguistic markers, documenting the long-term strengthening of the "security" language. The study identifies specific lexical clusters: the security narrative is characterized by "threat," "hostility," and "conflict"; the normality narrative operates with "partnership," "cooperation," and "best practices"; while the language of injustice centers on "hegemony," "unipolarity," and "dominance." Quantitative analysis confirms that the security discourse has gradually displaced alternative frames.

The third result presents a periodization based on the ratio of security and normality narratives (primarily in relations with the US), identifying five stages: 2000–2004, 2005–2008,



Security narrative (US and China, for China – right scale)

2009–2013, 2014–2021 and 2022. While a balance existed early on, the final stage reflects the absolute dominance of the threat-based lens. Post-2022, the perception of the external world as an existential challenge has become total, marginalizing the

language of international cooperation.

The fourth result identifies a close correlation between security and injustice narratives, driven primarily by the "Western direction." Marker frequencies for "threat" and "hegemony" nearly coincide, and key linguistic transformations are determined almost entirely by relations with the US and EU. This "West-centric" logic of conflict is automatically projected onto the non-Western world, stripping foreign policy of regional specificity.

The fifth result demonstrates the non-linear reaction to global shocks. Using 9/11 as an example, the study shows that a single event can simultaneously strengthen contradictory languages of "threat" and "partnership." This confirms that Russian foreign policy narratives are an autonomous system of meaning production aimed at confirming domestic identity through conflict or comparison with the Western "norm," rather than a tool for communication with the world.

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## Inter-Axis Hypotheses

A key outcome of this phase is the formation of inter-axis hypotheses, which compare timelines across different axes to analyze interactions over time. This direction moves the project from "parallel descriptions" to the analysis of causal links.

Approximately 30 hypotheses have been identified. A representative example is the 2017 turning point. Economic analysis shows that real disposable income reached a local minimum in 2017. Simultaneously, the social axis records the transition from "grassroots solidarity" to "tribalization." The inter-axis hypothesis suggests that the economic activation of the population (the search for additional income) led to the depoliticization of social networks. Trust was redirected from political solidarity to economic survival, lowering protest activity and stabilizing the system.

Other significant hypotheses include:

Culture ↔ Internal Politics: The "archaization by mistake" hypothesis, where conservative cultural choices are tactical decisions aimed at simplifying control.

Foreign Policy ↔ Culture: The scaling of foreign policy narratives (security, injustice) into internal cultural plots (sovereignty, isolation), where culture serves as a mechanism for normalization.

Politics ↔ Social Sphere: Post-2014, the social agenda and income redistribution became the primary resource for intra-elite competition, replacing economic reforms.

Cultural Status of Crises: Comparison of 1998 and 2008 shows that the massive economic losses of 2008 were reflected in cultural narratives to a far lesser extent than the 1998 crisis, requiring explanation through the structure of media and official discourse.

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## **Symposium**

In 2026, the Center for Russian Studies (CRS) at Tel Aviv University will host its first international symposium “Rethinking Russia”, on May 13–14, 2026. The symposium is conceived as a core element of the Center’s research agenda: an interdisciplinary forum for evaluating theoretical models and empirical evidence on Russia’s post-1991 development, and for moving beyond simplified “teleological” readings of the last three decades.

The program is built around five thematic discussions that mirror CRS’s analytical axes: cultural narratives, social dynamics (solidarization and atomization), economic institutions, political elites, and foreign policy events. The symposium format emphasizes scholarly dialogue rather than standard conference presentation: discussions will be organized around pre-circulated texts, enabling participants to engage directly with shared materials and to test claims against evidence in a structured setting.

The symposium brings together an international group of researchers from leading universities and research centers in Israel, Europe, the UK, and the United States, reflecting CRS’s ambition to serve as a hub for high-level interdisciplinary debate on contemporary Russia. The opening session will feature welcoming remarks from Tel Aviv University leadership and the CRS directors, followed by five consecutive discussion blocks across the two days, and concluding with a conference summary and closing remarks.

## **Other activities**

Alongside its research agenda, the Center is expanding its educational activities. A Master’s program in Russian Studies is currently in the launch phase, with the curriculum and institutional arrangements being finalized. In parallel, the Center is strengthening its academic training pipeline: it now has a PhD student affiliated with the CRS agenda, and it plans to introduce a postdoctoral position to support advanced research, supervision capacity, and the integration of empirical work across the Center’s five analytical axes.