

# Russia: the state of surprise

## Rude awakenings

The eruption of war in Ukraine in 2014 illustrated the strong and prevailing sense of surprise, even astonishment, that has pervaded post-Cold War Western public policy and mainstream media commentary in response to Russian actions. Perhaps the sharpest point was Russia's unexpected annexation of Crimea: one US observer suggested that the US administration was 'not prepared for the contingency that Putin would act so brazenly'.<sup>1</sup> William Hague, then British Foreign Secretary, had reassured the House of Commons that Russia was unlikely to intervene militarily in Crimea. Reflecting on Russian military actions, Breedlove stated that the Russians had demonstrated 'unexpected flexibility' in handling their forces in the Ukraine crisis.<sup>2</sup> Swedish analysts thus captured the sense of surprise perfectly as a 'rude awakening'.<sup>3</sup> Yet if the military surprises were widely acknowledged, others, even when the tension of the already aggravated situation should have sharpened awareness of Russian actions, escaped much mention: Russia's retaliatory imposition of sanctions on Western agricultural produce, for instance, was also largely unanticipated, as for many was the Russian military deployment to Syria in autumn 2015.

More precisely, however, it is *another* rude awakening. Since the 'founding surprise' of the collapse of the USSR – still for many the exemplary failure of expert political prediction<sup>4</sup> – Western officials and observers have been repeatedly surprised by developments in Russian domestic politics and Russian actions on the international stage, as expectations have been confounded and unanticipated developments emerged. They include a mix of longer-term trends and sudden developments, including Russia's economic recovery after the financial crisis of 1998, the Russian 'dash to Pristina' airport in June 1999, which created panic in NATO, Vladimir Putin's rise to

the leadership in 1999/2000, the gas disputes in 2006 and (again) in 2009, the Russo-Georgia war in 2008 (which David Miliband, then British Foreign Secretary, called a 'rude awakening'),<sup>5</sup> and the eruption of protest demonstrations in 2011.

Surprises can be attributed to cultural differences and the difficulties of political prediction, especially for outside observers of an environment such as Russia's in which institutions are weak and informal networks render decision-making processes and factional interests opaque, and in which there is simultaneously a lack of important information and a 'scarcely comprehensible overflow' of often deceptive and misleading information.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one of the reasons why interpreting Russia has proved so difficult is the increasingly obvious inability to distinguish between information which is important and that which is irrelevant, or between what may be called 'the signal and the noise'.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, those who are trying to interpret the actions of others can fall prey to deliberate deception. Deception and surprise are consequences of a culture of opacity and a deliberate feature of Russian life – in politics, but particularly, of course, in terms of military affairs. So central to Soviet thinking was it, that one observer concluded in the mid 1980s that 'NATO's senior commanders would do well to plan on the basis that they will (not may) be the victims of strategic surprise'.<sup>8</sup> This is still relevant, as illustrated by the infiltration and occupation of Crimea during the war in Ukraine in 2014. This we might separate from 'surprise' by calling 'shock', in that it is intended to achieve mental paralysis in opponents. If the Crimea operation was a 'surprise', since Western officials and observers were not paying attention to Russia more broadly and did not know what to expect, it was also a 'shock', since the surprise was deliberate.

But such an extensive list of surprises suggests that there are problems in how senior Western decision-makers, politicians and observers interpret Russia. Three related groups of more 'culpable' surprise stand out. The first might be called 'unknown knowns':<sup>9</sup> the necessary information was available, and appropriate warnings given to senior decision-makers by officials and experts, but then went unheeded in the final analysis either because it was poorly understood or interpreted, or because it was ignored. Many of the surprises noted above fall into this category. Prior to the outbreak of the Russo-Georgia War, for instance, experts and officials were advising senior leaders of the increasingly tense situation in the South Caucasus. The Organization for Security and Cooperation

in Europe (OSCE) had provided early warning in and around the conflict zone, and in the days before the conflict, the OSCE mission provided 'clear early warning of the escalation of hostilities'.<sup>10</sup> One Western official observed that all the relevant information was there, but senior decision-makers refused to believe that the Russians would resort to war – because they themselves would not have conceived of doing so. A similar situation prevailed in 2013 and 2014.

The second group may be called 'unknown unknowns', which are contingencies that have not been considered. These are the consequences of the serious decline in resources allocated to understanding Russia since the early 1990s. This has led to the degradation of institutional memory and a narrowed focus to only specific issues, and an inability to explore the wider picture beyond an often superficial grasp of the day's urgent headline. Again, this degradation can be illustrated by the war in Ukraine: only a very small handful of people had either the detailed and specific subject matter knowledge required to understand Russian military operations and thinking, particularly about Russian special operations forces, or evolving Russian threat perceptions that stretched back to the 1990s and through the Colour Revolutions in 2003 and 2004.

The third group of culpable surprises might be called 'assumed knowns'. These relate to the prevalence in the mainstream Western discussion of Russia of flawed predictions based on wishful thinking about Russia, the desire to see 'progress' and Russia's transition to democracy and acceptance of Western values. This created the basis for the orthodoxy of the ongoing 'crisis' of Putinism, with its corollaries of, for instance, the long-term misreading of the Putin–Medvedev tandem, especially the ongoing suspense over the anticipated split between the 'conservative' Putin and the 'liberal' Medvedev, and when Putin would fire Medvedev, and the repeated anticipations of the end of the Putin era.

This chapter explores the reasons for this state of surprise, sketching them out from the starting point of the significant (and ongoing) impact of the collapse of the USSR on Western understandings of Russia. First, it explores the practical ramifications for the decline of Russia as a political priority on the wider political stage: the West has not paid attention to developments in Russia unless they were part of an urgent and immediate crisis; in effect, the West 'moved on' from Russia, and since it was no longer a political (or security) priority, attention and resources were redirected elsewhere, and much of the practical capacity for understanding Russia has been

dispersed. It then turns to look more specifically at Russia studies. Buoyed by a confidence in the ‘end of history’, many of those in the West who continued to focus on Russia and the former Soviet space believed that Russia was in transition from communism to democracy and the acceptance of Western values: it would ‘move on’ from the political ruins of the USSR to return to the Western family of nations and become a partner on the international stage. This progressive, transitional paradigm broadly replaced a more classical area studies style approach to understanding Russia. This provides the basis for the final part of the discussion which outlines some of the problems of the current mainstream discussion of Russia, which is drowning in a discourse of speculation and rumour, ‘Putinology’ and historical analogies. This creates a great deal of additional noise that blocks the signal.

### **Moving on from Russia**

Russia has been prominent in a flood of editorials, media interviews and think tank publications first on the Sochi Winter Olympics and then the developing crises in Ukraine and Syria. There has been much debate about Vladimir Putin, his plans and goals, and his mental and physical health, as well as wider debates about corruption in Russia, the failings of the Russian economy, and Russian neo-imperial aggression.

As some observers suggested in spring 2014, however, this prominence has only obscured the ‘slow death of Russian and Eurasian studies’,<sup>11</sup> one that can be traced back to the collapse of the USSR. This argument that there is a lack of Russia expertise in the West has some merit, and was revisited in late December 2015 and January 2016.<sup>12</sup> Even in the early 1990s, Western governments were already looking beyond Russia and Eurasia to other priorities, such as the first Gulf War and Japan’s rise. This sense that the West had ‘moved on’ from Cold War era priorities and the problems with which post-Soviet Russia is associated subsequently accelerated in the late 1990s and early 2000s for two main reasons. First, there was increasing disappointment at the highest political levels in the West about the problematic nature of Russia’s transformation. This, combined with the Russian financial crisis in 1998, meant that, as one American observer suggested, ‘by late 2000 the “forget Russia” school was in the ascendency’ in the highest US official circles. Russia, weak at home and abroad, was no longer seen to matter, even as virtually irrelevant and not ‘worth worrying about’.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the trend accelerated as a result of problems elsewhere. The conflicts in the Middle East, the terrorist attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the rise of China: these have been the major themes dominating the Western political and security agenda since 2001. Even during the war in Ukraine, attention to Russia was diluted by the Ebola virus, the civil wars in Syria and Libya and migration across the Mediterranean Sea, and the emergence of the Islamic State, which most NATO member states asserted was the most serious threat to the West. This process was further accelerated by the wider conditions of economic austerity since the financial crisis of 2008 which have seriously affected state budgets, foundations and the media.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the numerous questions it poses, therefore, resources dedicated to understanding Russia were directed to other priorities and sharply decreased. Consequently, expertise on Russia across much of the Euro-Atlantic and 'G7' countries has either been redirected to other priorities or has atrophied and become both limited and fragmented as research centres have been wound down or closed.

As a result of this shift of attention, government support for Russia and Eurasia studies in the USA began a prolonged decline from the early 1990s. This continued into the 2000s, when the Bush administration conducted a review of Russia policy and reorganised the State Department, abolishing the Russia desk and sweeping it into the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs (which included 54 countries).<sup>15</sup> In late 2013, the State Department announced that it would withhold the budget for its Title VIII programme which provided support for policy relevant research and training on Eastern European and former USSR matters. One official suggested that 'in this fiscal climate, it just did not make it' (though Title VIII was resuscitated in 2015, it was at less than half its previous funding level and with its future unclear).<sup>16</sup> This has directly affected those institutions responsible for Russia-related research and teaching. Private funding for Russia-related research by grant making foundations has also considerably shrunk.

Russia expertise in the UK government has faced similar problems. Funding cuts led to a reduction in the number of Russian linguists in the armed forces, and the department with the relevant area expertise based at the Defence Academy of the UK was closed down in April 2010,<sup>17</sup> while Russia specialists were transferred to other desks, such as counter-terrorism. Speaking in September 2011, William Hague stated his surprise on discovering a shortage

of skilled Russian speakers in the FCO and an institutional shift away from 'investment in geographical and regional knowledge towards a prioritisation of rather nebulous themes'.<sup>18</sup> This point was reinforced by Rory Stewart, MP, who emphasised the shift from awareness of international affairs to management competencies, and thus a 'loss of capacity and hollowing out of (government) institutions which meant that not enough people were available to analyse' Crimea and Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere in Europe the situation is similar – Poland is one of the few places in the Euro-Atlantic area in which Russia studies have comparatively thrived.

To be sure, expertise and experience does remain, both in public policy circles and in academia. The appointment of John Tefft, for instance, a career Foreign Service Officer, as US ambassador to Russia in autumn 2014 illustrates the remaining core of expertise in the USA.<sup>20</sup> Similarly there are those such as Celeste Wallander and Ashton Carter who have longer-term experience of dealing with Russia. In the UK, there are a small number of officials with real knowledge about Russia and how it works. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that those with Russia expertise, including Tefft, are effectively being brought out of retirement; and, all told, the practical capacity to understand Russia is much reduced in policy-making circles. This has been recognised by Breedlove, who stated that his command's pool of Russia experts had 'shrunk considerably', and that 'Russian military operations in Ukraine and the region more broadly have underscored that there are critical gaps in our collection and analysis' of information about Russia. Thus, 'our textured feel for Russia's involvement on the ground in Ukraine has been quite limited'.<sup>21</sup> It was also underlined in a House of Lords report published in early 2015, which stated that EU member states had 'lost analytical capacity on Russia, with a concomitant decline in their ability to maintain oversight of the direction of the EU-Russia relationship', and 'weakened the ability to read political shifts and offer an authoritative response'. One consequence was that in the run up to the Ukraine crisis, 'important analytical mistakes were made', and warning signs 'were missed'.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond the immediate question of Ukraine, this decline in the practical capacity to understand the Russians is part of wider trends away from longer-term analysis and regional expertise (including developing a knowledge of those involved through the preparation of detailed personality reports on leading and emerging figures), and towards shorter-term crisis management approach. This has had a double impact for understanding Russia. First, few senior

political or official careers have been built on Russian affairs since the 1990s, so there are very few experienced Russia specialists at the heart of high-level decision-making in the West. There are also few younger experts or officials building Russia-focused careers in government and public policy debates – so if there are currently large gaps in expertise about Russia in the middle and higher echelons of officialdom, academia and the media, this problem will remain at least over the short term and be exacerbated by imminent retirements. Career turnover means that most of the remaining Soviet and early post-Soviet era specialists will soon retire, and those officials with experience and expertise gained during the late Soviet era and early 1990s will be replaced at the top by those who have built their careers in the post-9/11 era of attention to the Middle East and Central Asia.

Second, those public policy bodies and think tanks that retained a Russia capacity were either understaffed or have run small programmes with only few analysts who attempt to cover wide regional and thematic portfolios – often one researcher or analyst attempting to cover the whole of the former Soviet space, including economic, political, social and military matters. This can only result in superficial work, particularly in the form of short-term responses to the current headlines or the immediate crisis. More wide-ranging or detailed research cannot be carried out, and subjects which require specialised knowledge, such as military or the security services, or even economics, do not receive sustained, sophisticated attention. In many cases, therefore, the research agenda has narrowed to specific questions relating to the trend towards liberal priorities such as the development of grassroots civil society and the politics of protest in Russia.

The situation in academia is similar. Peter Rutland, a professor of government and long-term Russia specialist, has noted that only three of eight Ivy League universities have appointed a tenured professor in Russian politics since the collapse of the USSR, and none have appointed any in economics or sociology. In Germany there are only three professors of Russian politics, and one each in Russian economics and sociology.<sup>23</sup>

These points tend to be emphasised by the way mass media or government agencies draw on a limited number of commentators who broadly fall into two camps: the growing number of pessimists who see Russia as a declining power that poses a threat to its neighbours and a destabilising international role, and the decreasing number of optimists who argue Russia's extenuating

circumstances and that Russia is a ‘normal country’. The result, Rutland suggests, is a superficial public policy and media discussion that is both further separated from what remaining expertise there is, and often little more than an exchange between these two camps divided along relatively primitive and binary ‘good v. evil’ lines.<sup>24</sup> This is further emphasised because the shrinking scale of expertise on Russia opens the field to pundits and pseudo-experts offering ‘crunchy deductions’ about Russia, which are often little more than threadbare metaphors and analogies, stereotypes and clichés.

In some ways, therefore, it is tempting to argue that the sense of surprise is due to the reduced capacity to understand Russia – there has been an emptying out of regional expertise (and the gap is often filled by non-experts offering opinions). The fracturing and loss of available institutional memory and expertise in the West about how Russian leaders perceive the world, what has happened and why in Russia, what has been tried in relations with Russia and why, and what has worked (and failed) and why, has had important consequences. Indeed, the knowledge of and capacity to understand the ‘who is who’ (and why) and ‘what is what’ (and why) of Russian politics has been considerably diminished.

Nevertheless, this is only part of the picture. It is highlighted because what remains of the expertise and experience is not well transmitted to – or received by – decision-makers, often because it has been overshadowed by attention to other questions or because it contradicts the prevailing political orthodoxy which has emphasised wishful ‘end of history’ thinking and Russia’s transition to a democracy and attempts to build strategic partnership with Russia as a member of the ‘Western family of nations’. The problems of ‘unknown knowns’ and ‘assumed knowns’ both illustrate the separation of expertise from politics and decision-making, and mean that even a substantial increase in analysts might not reduce surprise or help to ‘get Russia right’. This leads to the second set of problems, the dominance of a misleading orthodoxy about Russia’s domestic and international trajectory.

### **The rise of ‘transitionology’: Russia – moving on?**

The collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR led to a new confidence in the ‘end of history’ and the hope that Russia was in transition towards democracy and returning to the Western family of nations. This optimism provided the more theoretical basis of the view among many Russia watchers that Russia was ‘moving on’.

In fact, the collapse of the USSR has had serious ramifications for the study of Russia in the West, resulting in a major reassessment of Soviet studies, often bitter and acrimonious.<sup>25</sup> Two sets of problems stand out, one more focused on the nature of the debate in the mid-to-late 1980s, the other reflecting a deeper question about how best to understand Russia.

First, David Engerman points to the political split in the 1980s among US Soviet experts over the role of Gorbachev, between those who were more 'totalitarian' and those who were more 'revisionist'. The groups were divided over whether Gorbachev really intended reform, or was just talking a good game, and, if he was serious, would he succeed? According to Engerman, this debate was largely framed on the basis of previously held ideological views of Russian and Soviet history, and developments in the USSR were used as point-scoring in internal debates, rather than as a means of understanding developments in the USSR itself. 'While Gorbachev stirred the USSR out of its Brezhnev era stagnation, his policies did little to stir Sovietologists out of theirs', Engerman suggested.<sup>26</sup>

Others have pointed to supplementary problems. Patrick Coburn noted the 'alarming multiplication' of the use of historical analogies in Soviet studies, a point echoed by others. Leo Labedz, too, suggested that analogies were 'produced like rabbits from a magician's hat on any occasion', that are as 'suggestive as they are misleading', strimming off of peculiarities, details and doubts about the progressive nature of history. Prominent analogies included comparing Gorbachev with Peter the Great and the rise and fall of Khrushchev. These allowed observers to draw comfortable implications that what was happening was not so original, and that recent reforms were continually vulnerable to conservative counter-attack, perhaps culminating – like the fate of Khrushchev in 1964 – in the overthrow of Gorbachev and the reversal of the changes he had introduced. Yet such analogies were misleading, because Soviet society had evolved enormously between 1964 and 1984, and because they often acted as substitutes for sober evaluation, he argued.<sup>27</sup>

In his 'post mortem' on Sovietology in 1993, Peter Rutland suggested that a preoccupation with current events at the expense of longer-term trends compounded this analytical weakness, suggesting that the 'role of media pundit and soothsayer proved all too attractive to well-placed Sovietologists', while careful empirical research offered only meagre rewards. Thus the discussion became dominated by those who 'could hardly find the Volga river on the map', but felt qualified to reflect publicly on the views of leading

political figures.<sup>28</sup> As discussed below, all of these are problems that have continued – or resurfaced – in Russia studies today.

The second problem related to the best method of understanding Russia. During the late 1980s, Soviet studies was dominated by two main methodological approaches, the more ‘area studies’ approach often called ‘Kremlinology’, which focused on elite politics, and the more comparative social and political science approach that explored questions of wider civil society. Tension between the two approaches is long-standing. Kremlinology is often described as the ‘careful, usually tedious study of who was up and who was down’, through noting ‘which stiff, unappetising looking man had been positioned closest to the leader at a state parade’ because there was ‘no other way to calibrate the hierarchy’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as historian Robert Conquest suggested in 1961:

Kremlinology had long been seen as a ‘somewhat disreputable’ and eccentric approach that extrapolated too much from very limited available information. Its advocates appeared to speak ‘absolute certainties on the basis of cloudy figures swirling in [their] crystal balls, sometimes going beyond what the evidence could stand and offering assertions instead of knowledge. It was thus considered by many to be an approach associated with the “black arts” and intelligence agencies, rather than scholarship’.<sup>30</sup>

By the 1980s, political and social science critics of Kremlinology asserted that it was merely dynastics and crypto-politics, and that its focus on bureaucratic processes and the leadership came at the expense of attention to wider civil and social phenomena. This critique became more pronounced in response to Gorbachev’s perestroika, as some scholars of communism began to draw on modernisation theories to explain the fall of authoritarian regimes based on structural factors such as increased wealth, communications and education.

The revolutions and the failure of the majority of the Soviet studies community to foresee them intensified this critique. One of the main reasons for the failure to predict them, some suggested, was the excessive focus on the political leadership and bureaucracy instead of the relationship between the leadership and the population, and the obsession with endless succession struggles rather than the deeper trends in society.<sup>31</sup> In the wake of the revolutions, the social science based approach gained greater traction, as many in the West assumed that Russia was in transition to something better and higher, and the focus of their attention shifted away from

studying the roles and relations of senior individuals towards a greater focus on civil society and Russia's movement towards liberal democracy.<sup>32</sup> This sense of transition, visible in parts of academia, was particularly strong in the public policy and the media, and the result was a turn away from understanding the functions of the main leadership organs towards a focus on democratisation and electoral processes, political parties, the influence of public opinion on Russian foreign policy, and public opinion forecasting and statistical modelling.<sup>33</sup>

The centre of attention was thus on indices of political competition and participation, human rights, corruption, the rule of law, and media freedom. These have remained the focal points of analysis, even as attention has drifted back to a narrower snapshot of the role of the Russian leadership. Echoing the waves of enthusiasm for democracy promotion in other regions in the 1980s, this approach became the core of the Western official and expert approach to Russia, and the basic premise that, however difficult the route might prove, Russia was in a process of reform from communism to capitalism and democracy became the new orthodoxy and prevailing way of posing questions about Russia.<sup>34</sup>

In some ways, hopes for Russia's transformation to democracy began to fade in the early 2000s. As Thomas Carothers noted in 2002, 'many countries that policy makers and aid practitioners persist in calling "transitional" are not in transition to democracy, and of the democratic transitions that are under way, more than a few are not following the model' (of transitionology).<sup>35</sup> But this represented an evolution rather than a change of approach, and if most officials and academic observers of Russia have become increasingly aware of the limitations of approaching Russia in terms of its progress towards democracy, the threads of transitionology/democratisation have remained dominant and re-emerge with regularity. Indeed, they have been sustained by a series of social movements in other countries, first in the 'Colour Revolutions' in the former USSR from 2003 to 2005,<sup>36</sup> then the so-called 'Arab Spring' and then protest demonstrations in Russia in 2011–2012, and most recently the Euro-Maidan in Ukraine.<sup>37</sup>

Regarding Russia more specifically, the question evolved from 'transitionology' to the 'regime question' – a different epithet for much the same series of issues – and adjectival democracy and qualified authoritarianism, such as discussion of 'managed democracy'. Even as hopes for Russia's moves towards democracy faded during Putin's second term as president (2004–2008), mainstream media,

academic, think tank and official analysis was still conducted pursuing questions of the roll-back of democracy and the lengthening list of sins against democratic standards carried out by the Russian leadership, and the desirability of supporting democratic change in Russia. This ‘roll back of democracy’ or ‘de-democratisation’ included the taming of independent media, decreasing the autonomy of regional governments and the appointment of regional governors, the emasculation of the Federal Assembly, and pressure on, even repression of, political parties not aligned with the Kremlin, with particular attention being given to the more liberal ones, such as Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces, who often sought support in the West.<sup>38</sup> The focus of mainstream Western attention narrowed to support for the (liberal) opposition to Putin and objections to the Kremlin’s repressive measures against it, in effect the story of embattled and threatened democracy. As historian Stephen Kotkin noted, the narrative of Russia’s ‘overturned democracy unite(d) Cold War nostalgists who miss the enemy with a new generation of Russia watchers, many of whom participated earnestly in the illusory 1990s democracy building project in Russia and are now disillusioned (and tenured)’.<sup>39</sup>

And so periodic revivals of the hope for Russia’s transition to democracy emerged, most obviously when Dmitri Medvedev replaced Vladimir Putin as president in 2008. Many Western officials and commentators saw him as a more liberal and Western-leaning figure, an independent alternative to Putin, a leader from the post-Soviet generation who attacked legal nihilism and the concept of sovereign democracy, promised reforms and reached out to the opposition. As discussed below, most of the mainstream debate about Russia during Medvedev’s term as president (2008–2012) focused on whether the more ‘liberal’ Medvedev would succeed in stimulating Russia’s internal transformation, and create a turning point in Russian history and pull away from the more conservative Putin, and an underlying sense that Medvedev was gradually leading Russia towards joining the international order.<sup>40</sup> This belief in the more liberal Medvedev underlay the ‘reset’ undertaken by the Obama administration in 2009.

Similarly, hopes for democratic transition re-emerged during the protest demonstrations in late 2011 and early 2012, widely seen in the West as an ‘unprecedented re-politicisation’ of Russian politics and society, and the emergence (at last) of an increasingly politically active liberal urban middle class led by a new wave of non-systemic opposition to Putin that used Western-style political campaigning

and modern communications technology (particularly social media) to mobilise a support base. As a result, one Western journalist noted that the protesters were greeted with ‘almost unanimous enthusiasm in the West as representatives of a new, freer generation of Russians’.<sup>41</sup>

Many of the theoretical concepts that had been applied in the late 1980s were (often unwittingly) dusted down and used to explain the protest demonstrations in 2011 and 2012: the importance of the leader–population relationship and the declining legitimacy of authoritarian rulers as a result of increasing popular wealth, education and improving communications. The demonstrations, as will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3, were represented as Putin ‘losing touch’ with the population, particularly the part that had previously supported him (the middle classes who had become more wealthy during his first two terms in office) and their evolution into an increasingly wealthy urban middle class which demanded fair political representation. The ‘beginning of the end of the Putin era’ had begun, many believed, with some suggesting that the Putin regime might even collapse like the Soviet one had before it. (This theme returns regularly to the discussion, most recently during late 2014 when the Russian economy came under severe pressure, a crisis reported by some as heralding a collapse similar to the collapse of the USSR.)<sup>42</sup>

Even in Putin’s third term, starting in 2012 and continuing through the 2014 Ukraine crisis, when there has been much more focus on increasing authoritarianism in Russia and particularly Putin himself (even to the extent, as discussed below, of the emergence of ‘Putinology’), the threads of transitionology and the hopeful search for liberalism in Russia have remained strong. Interviewing Putin about amnesties he had granted in December 2013, one prominent British journalist wanted to know if they were ‘real liberal efforts’ that were part of Russian policy. When Putin asked what kind of answer Andrew Marr expected from him, Marr replied ‘I’d like you to say “I am a real liberal and hold liberal views”’.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the underlying assumption of much mainstream analysis is that it is Putin himself (even Putin alone) who blocks Russia’s transition, seeks to turn back the clock, and stops it from rejoining the West – and that when he leaves the stage, democratic transformation will succeed.<sup>44</sup>

This progressive, transition-based approach has placed significant limits on understanding Russia. It is inherently ideological: how to reform Russia in the model of the West and explain it through Western concepts. Such an approach has proved elliptical and very selective in its choice of emphasis – and, of course, of omission.

Indeed, as Stephen Cohen has suggested, by adopting a comparative approach and in the certainty of change, many ‘overlooked Russia itself’, instead offering ‘virtual accounts’ of a Russia they wanted to see, one that was becoming ever more like the West.<sup>45</sup>

The mainstream public and official discussion often begins from the point of view of what we would like to happen, ought to happen.<sup>46</sup> This has served as the means by which questions are shaped and evidence is chosen: ignoring some altogether, exaggerating desired evidence, and removing it from the Russian context and placing it onto a Western-shaped Procrustean bed in the confident assertion of the end of history and the inevitability of Russia’s West-ward democratic change. At the same time, many who discuss Russia tend towards using a limited range of sources (including interviewing a limited circle of Russians) – most of which have a more liberal or Western orientation.<sup>47</sup> Together, this has created an understanding of Russia through ‘mirror-imaging’, the assumption that the Russians see the world in the same way and with the same points of reference and understandings.

As suggested above, it has progressively narrowed the range of questions posed of Russia to those which focus on the (liberal) opposition to Putin and the leadership’s repressive responses, thus shining a distorting light on how Russia works, one which leaves many shadows and gaps, particularly in terms of how the state works, the ‘who is who’ and ‘what is what’. The vertical of power, for instance, has been understood in democratic/authoritarian terms, rather than its effectiveness, allowing the perpetuation of the idea that it has worked well. But it does not work well, and the attempt to make it function more effectively, as discussed in Chapter 4, is one of the central themes of Russian political life. Similarly, reforms are considered along the spectrum of whether they leading towards a more Western, transitional model or not. This can miss the purpose behind the almost constant reforms ongoing in Russia, and also their failings (and occasional successes). The spotlight focus on the elections in 2011 and 2012 (and their flaws), and Putin’s return to the presidency has meant that there has been little sophisticated attention directed to the shaping of his goals and policies – and the conspicuous failure to achieve them.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, the progressive, transition-based approach has drawn the discussion away from research and detailed analysis towards advocacy and partisan debate over this narrow range of questions. This has had two main results. First, as Marc Bennetts, a Western journalist based in Moscow, has suggested, the sins of Putin’s regime

were so apparent, even blatant, that it was tempting to support the opposition without examining too closely the convictions and ideologies of its figureheads: reformers and critics of the regime are assumed to be pro-Western and often hailed.<sup>49</sup> Alexei Navalniy, for instance, a young and photogenic figure, is often feted in the West as a ‘blogger and anti-corruption campaigner’, and ‘a pro-democracy campaigner’, a ‘new figure’ who emerged with the protests to unite the Russian opposition. His ten-year career as a politician is often ignored, as are many of his less palatable political views and actions which do not correspond to Western democratic standards.<sup>50</sup> Here it is also worth noting that in international affairs, too, participant sources are imported often wholesale without examination: during the Russo-Georgia War in 2008, and war in Ukraine that began in 2014, Georgian and Ukrainian sources were often not critically examined before being absorbed and deployed in assessments of Russia and Russian intentions.

Second, related to this, there is a tendency towards linguistic and numerical inflation and imprecision – again, often directly imported unchecked from opposition leaders themselves. Thus Putin’s leadership is often described variously as authoritarian, autocratic, dictatorial or even despotic,<sup>51</sup> whereas those (particularly non-systemic) opposition figures who oppose him are championed as charismatic ‘crusaders’ and democratic – with characteristics that do not accord with this image either soft-pedalled or entirely ignored. As will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3, the protest demonstrations offer a good example of numerical inflation, as estimates of the size of the protest demonstrations grew according to estimates given by the organisers (and supplemented by reportage of the calls by those organisers for ‘million man marches’). Thus duly impressive numbers of demonstrators could be suggested to have emerged onto the streets of Russia – and it has now become standard to portray them as a ‘wave of popular protest’ of ‘tens of thousands’, or even ‘tens, then hundreds of thousands’.<sup>52</sup>

Such an approach has its place. But many commentators appear to seek to play a part in ‘the Russian play’, partial to one side (the opposition), constructing a narrative to support its cause and delivering draconian moral verdicts, even seeking to exact some form of revenge on the other (Putin). Too often, therefore, advocacy and analysis become conflated: the story is drawn in straight lines and the classification of Russia into those who furthered the desirable cause of progress and the villains who hindered it, and the leaving out of the evidence that gets in the way of the moral judgement.

## **Drowning in discourse: the noise, but not the signal**

Despite the dominance of transitological/regime question approach and the perceived eccentricity of Kremlinology, for many it has remained a truism of Russian political life that the final decisions are made behind the closed doors of the Kremlin. As a result, the mainstream discussion of Russia is peppered with exotic myths and anecdotal information and rumours about veiled, behind-the-scenes power often reflected in vague but compelling caricatures of ‘grey cardinals’<sup>53</sup> and the ‘return to power of the KGB’. Observers comment with great conviction about matters about which they cannot possibly know,<sup>54</sup> and unsubstantiated (and often misleading) rumours and opinions are often directly imported unchecked from the politicised and cynical Russian political and media discussion into the Western mainstream discussion. Masquerading as evidence, they are often recycled until they become laundered and established ‘facts on the historical record’. Speculation and insinuation is widespread about reshuffles, infighting within and between clans, potential ‘palace coups’ in the Kremlin, and about the health,<sup>55</sup> sexuality or even criminality<sup>56</sup> of senior figures in the Russian leadership. This creates a discussion close to what Russian post-modern novelist Viktor Pelevin would call ‘discourse-mongering’,<sup>57</sup> which amplifies the noise, even to the exclusion of the signal.

### *Conspiracy theories*

The roles of the KGB and its successor agencies, particularly the Federal Security Service (FSB), offer a broad canvas of historical and ideological conflict, political and commercial intrigue, sex and glamour and accusations of mass murder and international assassination.<sup>58</sup> The KGB and FSB are the subject of a number of conspiracy theories, perhaps the most prominent and recurring of which is a series of bombings in 1999, in which four explosions destroyed apartment blocks in cities across Russia, killing 293 people. Conspiracy theories were based initially on the discovery of the FSB in a fifth location, apparently preparing another attack, but this was fanned by a series of subsequent suspicious coincidences, including the deaths of two people who were investigating the explosions, the arrest of a third on dubious charges and finally a closed trial of two suspects.

Undoubtedly, the FSB handled the matter clumsily. But there was little substantial evidence to support the theory, and researchers have

suggested that it is more likely that Chechens or Chechen-associated Wahhabi militants carried out the attacks.<sup>59</sup> The conspiracy theory has survived, however, largely due to the efforts of exiled political opponents of Vladimir Putin. The theory gained a new lease of life after the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006, who had himself contributed to the theory, co-authoring a book on it. Indeed, Litvinenko's murder was another scandal spun into dark conspiracy theories, some tying the two events together, suggesting that he was murdered because of his whistle-blowing about the bombings.

The point here is that conspiracy theories thrive in a context of 'normalisation', where it is to be found everywhere, and conspiracy theories and normal politics in Russia have become entwined in mainstream Western thinking about Russia. This is important because the security services also loom large in the wider narrative of Russian politics, the broad threads of which are that Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer, has led a return to power of the KGB to rule Russia. Thus the sense of conspiracy underpins the discussion of Russian politics as a whole, and often returns to the surface as 'fact'. Some suggested, for instance, that the FSB were behind the terrorist attacks in Volgograd in December 2013,<sup>60</sup> and conspiracy theories immediately proliferated with the murder of Boris Nemtsov in February and then with Putin's 'disappearance' in March 2015.

### *Signals signifying nothing? Putin v. Medvedev*

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of speculation coming to dominate the mainstream discussion, however, relates to the relationship between Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev.<sup>61</sup> This reflected the influence of the 'transitionology' approach as officials and commentators sought (and often predicted) a split between the two men who were seen to represent different political camps. Putin, the former KGB agent, was seen to represent a reactive past, while Medvedev, the younger man, was seen to represent a post-Soviet outlook and more liberal future.

It is not entirely clear today where the sense of Medvedev's liberalism came from. It appears to have been built on a mix of negatives and assumptions: he is not Putin, and not KGB, but a lawyer who decried legal nihilism and corruption in Russia, and who appeared to adopt a more tolerant approach to individual rights. His domestic priorities were seen to suggest a preference for modern technology, innovation and modernisation, while his foreign priorities

were seen to suggest a less confrontational approach to the West. This view was illustrated by Obama immediately prior to a visit to Russia in 2009, when he suggested that Putin kept ‘one foot in the old ways of doing business’, while Medvedev understood that ‘cold war behaviour is outdated’.<sup>62</sup>

Medvedev’s long-standing relationship with Putin, and other important aspects of his biography which might have cast doubt on his liberal credentials, such as his senior position in Gazprom, the Russian gas monopoly, rarely featured in the Western discussion. Nevertheless, on this somewhat unclear but hopeful basis, senior Western officials and commentators invested much hope in Medvedev as a man of the future (even if they believed him to be vulnerable in the shadow of Putin), and evidence of contradiction between the two men was sought on almost every issue. Indeed, the search became so prevalent that every speech or interview given by either individual was microscopically examined not so much for the thrust of what was said, but for hints of contradictions and indications of preparation for campaigning for the presidency. Increasingly absurd possibilities were voiced by observers: some suggested that Medvedev – who many asserted had only a weak team of supporters – could run against Putin, defeat him, and then set out his own more liberal agenda. Others posited that Putin and Medvedev, despite representing the same political leadership team, might decide to run against each other in the election.

Serious tensions between a state’s president and prime minister are an important matter. The dominance of this question, however, posed more problems for the Western understanding of Russia than benefits offered. It served to distract Western attention and generate much inaccurate and often meaningless discourse. First, and perhaps most obviously, the predictions of Putin firing Medvedev that began in 2008 when Medvedev became president proved incorrect. Although they drew on Russian commentary, they ran counter to the views of senior Russian officials and political observers. As one prominent Russian commentator suggested, the differences between the two men are ‘mainly in the minds of dreamer political analysts, rather than reality’.<sup>63</sup>

Regardless, for years this remained the lens through which Russian politics was viewed and explained in the mainstream Western discussion, and there has been surprisingly little retrospective reflection on this approach, either about the persistent failure of these expectations to take place, or in terms of possible alternative ways to view the Putin–Medvedev relationship: it often appeared to

miss the important point that if Medvedev did not have a team of his own, he was still on Putin's team.

With the announcement in September 2011 that Putin would run for the presidency in 2012, predictions of a split between the men continued but in a different guise: Putin would not fulfil his (publicly announced) intention to appoint Medvedev as his prime minister, and would instead appoint Alexei Kudrin. When Putin did appoint Medvedev, the debate evolved again to focus on when Putin would fire Medvedev and his cabinet to be replaced by Kudrin. Again, this rested on a series of abridged assumptions – that Putin would appoint Kudrin, a successful finance minister for many years popular in the West, to the position of prime minister, and that Kudrin is a liberal figure.

These assumptions are tenuous, often running against important evidence, such as Putin's own statements, and reflect hopeful abstraction rather than political reality; they reflected the shifting of the liberal mantle Western observers had imposed on Medvedev onto Kudrin. They also fail to offer answers to questions important for understanding Russian politics: on what grounds would Medvedev be removed from the position of prime minister? To where would he, a close ally of Putin, be moved? How might Kudrin offer a substantial difference to Medvedev? Would he be any more able to implement an agenda than Medvedev?

### *'Putinology'*

Since the mid 2000s, the mainstream Western discussion of Russia has progressively focused on Vladimir Putin as the means by which to understand Russia. As Stephen Kotkin has put it, this offers to explain Russia through the lens of a 'one man capture of the state', in which his KGB background, the lingering emotions and politics of the Cold War, and scandals and conspiracy theories are all mixed together and magnified.<sup>64</sup> This accelerated with the announcement in September 2011 that it would be Putin who would run for the presidency.

'Putinology' may appear as a form of Kremlinology, albeit a 'pale 21st-century successor' presenting an understanding of the leadership as the key to understanding current events.<sup>65</sup> It is not. As one observer has pointed out, it is usually a range of speculations about his personality and intentions, not a careful analysis of what he says.<sup>66</sup> Instead, despite its appearances, as noted above, 'Putinology' is more often a form of transitionology: the constant

reiteration of Putin's KGB background offers a means of highlighting authoritarianism, and of suggesting that Putin, the 'anti-Yeltsin' and 'anti-Gorbachev', seeks to 'turn back the clock' and repudiate the transformational policies of his predecessors. Indeed, in many ways, particularly since 2011, 'Putinology' has appeared as 'demonology', a line in the struggle of 'good v. evil'.<sup>67</sup>

Two particular threads of 'Putinology' stand out. First, in depicting his creation of the 'vertical of power', Western observers have over-invented Putin as a strong, authoritarian leader. But such a story leaves many gaps, and fails to distinguish, for example, between his dominance of politics and his grip on power. This theme has remained resistant to considerable evidence to the contrary. The 'vertical of power' does not work effectively, however, except through direct manual control, and so if Putin has a broad 'grip on politics' in terms of his dominance of the political situation, his grip on power in terms of having policies implemented is less clear: his instructions are often ignored.

Second, 'Putinology' often degenerates into cod psychology: the attempt to 'read' Putin to understand Russia and Russian actions. Journalists and other observers 'diagnose' Putin with a range of psychological disorders, from his 'deep insecurity' to becoming 'unhinged' during the Ukraine crisis, from being arrogant and self-assured, yet paranoid and hypersensitive, to an authoritarian kleptocrat, a sufferer of pleonexia. He is 'stuck in the past', a neo-Soviet who 'sees the world as a KGB officer would', someone who believes his own propaganda and lies, and is afraid of the democratic breakthrough in Ukraine that exposes his own lack of legitimacy.<sup>68</sup> In February 2015, a US Pentagon-sponsored report surfaced suggesting that Putin suffered from autism – which could, some observers asserted, explain his 'authoritarian style' and 'obsession with "extreme control"'.<sup>69</sup>

Such an approach creates some serious problems in understanding Russia because it increasingly becomes an analytical dead-end. Observers and officials alike accuse Putin of lying or irrationality – but if he is lying (or 'crazy') then his views, which are certainly unappealing to many in the West, do not have to be listened to or entertained, let alone argued with. Thus it becomes 'Putinology without Putin' – since the undesirable 'substance' of Putin can be ignored.

'Putinology' has become ever more prominent – as illustrated by the discussion surrounding his 'disappearance' for a few days in March 2015, during which speculation and rumour spread quickly

about his health (cancer, a stroke, even death), or had fallen victim to a coup led by ‘hard-liners’ such as Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev or by Head of the Presidential Administration Sergei Ivanov, and that Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev was calling the shots,<sup>70</sup> or that Putin was preparing a major political re-organisation, or that he had flown to Switzerland to attend the birth of his child.

Certainly Putin is the central figure of Russian political life, wielding substantial political power at the heart of the leadership team, and enjoying considerable popularity. But Putinology – often tantamount to demonology – has served as an alibi for the absence of a policy towards Russia,<sup>71</sup> and disguised the lack of wider knowledge about Russia and understanding of how it works. Not only are the micro-assessments of Putin and ‘what he is thinking or really wants’ often misleading, but Putin is not synonymous with Russia, nor is he all-powerful.

Indeed, nor is it clear that ‘Putinology’ has helped to understand Putin. Though he has been the focus of the West’s attention to Russia for over a decade, prominent observers were arguing in 2012 that ‘little is known about Putin’s past and fundamental nature’,<sup>72</sup> and, as one experienced Russia-watcher noted, having for years been fixated on Putin ‘the KGB thug’, the West was still surprised when he acted like one in Ukraine in 2014.<sup>73</sup>

### *Historical analogies: into the hall of ever simplifying mirrors*

Another feature of the mainstream Western discussion about Russia is the prominence of repetitive but superficial historical analogy. Parallels are drawn with a range of historical contexts and episodes. Post-Soviet Russia has been compared to Weimar Germany, and analogies have been drawn with the idea of the Russian ‘Time of Troubles’, in reference to different periods of Russian history that were particularly uncertain and marked by domestic unrest. More specific domestic examples include the analogy of the Pussy Riot court case with the nineteenth-century Dreyfus affair in France, and Boris Nemtsov’s murder compared to the murder of Kirov in 1934.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, there were multiple analogies drawn between the protest demonstrations in 2011 and the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ in North Africa and the Middle East,<sup>75</sup> the 2004 ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine, and the collapse of the USSR.

Analogies are also used to explain Russian actions on the international stage. Since the mid 2000s, Russia’s relations with the West

have increasingly often been described as a 'new Cold War'. Some have suggested that Russia's recovery and international behaviour under Putin is similar to aggressive Soviet behaviour: Russian action during the Russo-Georgia War in 2008 was compared by some senior officials and observers to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.<sup>76</sup>

Others have asserted Nazi analogies, mostly obviously during the war in Ukraine when officials and observers alike invoked a series of analogies with the Anschluss and the Nazi annexation of Sudetenland, and Western actions of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and the Munich accords.<sup>77</sup> During 2014, Putin himself, already often compared to numerous Russian and Soviet leaders, including Peter the Great, Nicholas I, Leonid Brezhnev, Nikita Khrushchev, Yuri Andropov and Mikhail Gorbachev, was increasingly compared to Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler.

Historical comparisons are drawn by Russians themselves. Putin himself has suggested that Pyotr Stolypin, prime minister from 1906 to 1911, is a model (though without taking the comparison too far, since Stolypin was assassinated), and Putin's press secretary Dmitri Peskov caused a stir by acknowledging the comparison of Putin with Brezhnev, suggesting that the Brezhnev era was 'a huge plus' for Russia.<sup>78</sup> During the 2011 protest demonstrations the imagery of the Orange Revolution was used by both the authorities and the protesters: pro-government demonstrators, for instance, waved flags with an orange snake gripped in a black fist, while protesters sought to recreate a 'maidan' atmosphere.

Yet analogies create much additional noise that distorts our understanding of current developments in Russia. They distract attention from developments rather than informing understanding of them: during Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea, for instance, the Western discussion was dominated by Sudetenland comparisons rather than the Russian military operation or Russia's evolving military capabilities or security thinking.<sup>79</sup>

The problems of 'unreasoning by analogy' are well-known and do not need to be elaborated in depth here, nor is this the place to pick each analogy apart.<sup>80</sup> But three related points are worth making. First, analogies compare as yet unclear and poorly understood developments with an abridged, simplified and unambiguous idea of an event (or collection of events) that is itself poorly understood and of which the specifics and context have been forgotten or shaved off. Indeed, the analogy rests purely on the basis that it appears familiar, not its relevance, accuracy or detail.

Second, analogies blur the differences between the presumed and the known to create a narrative of ‘irresistible force’ – but one that is an artificial edifice.<sup>81</sup> Analogy renders history as myth, a shorthand, primitive explanation for the world that often reflects a sacred or emotive tale: it is invoked to justify certain policies by generating immediate associations that do not brook debate because of their moral appeal. The emotive appeal of the analogy is its elliptical quality that forestalls logical questioning of the parallel being drawn, and short-cutting the process of thinking to trigger agreement. The analogy therefore abridges complex developments into simple, unambiguous and politically charged symbols.

Third, analogies are often reflected back onto each other, creating the effect of a hall of ever simplifying mirrors, reflecting images that we want to see. The analogy of the Russian protest demonstrations in 2011 variously with the collapse of the USSR, ‘Arab Spring’ and Orange Revolution offers a good example, reflecting as they do the persistent desire to see progress towards (liberal Western) democracy.<sup>82</sup> Not only were these reflected back and forth onto each other, as the Orange Revolution and ‘Arab Spring’ were compared to each other and the collapse of the USSR, but the comparisons were misleading. The ‘Arab Spring’ protest movements had varied causes and different goals which could not be boiled down to an oversimplified narrative of democracy, freedom and human rights.<sup>83</sup> The ‘Orange Revolution’ was a much larger protest demonstration that occurred in the wake of an election in which victory had been snatched from one candidate by another in what was a close result – when in Russia, there was no such close result.

### **Reflecting on surprise: the unlearnt lessons of Soviet studies?**

The state of surprise so prevalent in the West is the result of a complex of problems that have led to a series of miscalculations about Russia, miscalculations that are often guided by wishful thinking and an inability to distinguish fact from fancy. The post-Cold War turn to other priorities and reduction in attention to Russia – and the consequent decline of resources devoted to its study – has resulted in a shortage of expertise. Expertise which exists has become limited and dispersed, and often neither at the highest levels of politics, nor able effectively to transmit information to those levels. Many of the most senior people in the field are long-serving Soviet

studies specialists or those who built their careers in the optimistic transition period of the early-to-mid 1990s. If it is true, therefore, that some subjects are well covered, such as human rights abuses and electoral failings, many important gaps have opened up: for instance there are very few with the requisite specialist knowledge of economics, or military and security affairs. Furthermore, only very few young Russia specialists have emerged to prominence in public policy, academia, think tanks or the media since then.

The consequences of this situation are that there is limited institutional memory about post-Cold War Russia in many Western governments, and a limited capacity to decipher the vast amount of information about Russia, distinguishing the signal from the noise. Attempts to address this by moving staff around have produced only limited benefit: individuals or small teams are temporarily switched from the Middle East or North Africa to look at Russia. Competent they may be, but they often lack knowledge of Russia, even of basic background context. What remains of non-governmental expertise is often drowned out by the more numerous and vocal non-subject matter experts in high-profile media.

The decrease in the capacity of Russia expertise, however, is just one of a series of problems that underlie the state of surprise about Russia in the West. It is exacerbated by other important failures, all of which have long been recognised in international affairs and forecasting studies, and many of which would be familiar to those who have analysed the flaws of Soviet studies. Indeed, despite the prolonged debate about the failure to forecast the end of the Soviet Union, many of the 'lessons' appear not to have not been digested.

The first point is the pronounced ethnocentrism and 'mirror-imaging' that has pervaded Western interpretations of post-Cold War Russia. 'End of history' optimism and the conviction that Russia was embarking on a transition to democracy and a return to the Western family of nations has proven remarkably persistent. On one hand, it has sustained a false belief that Russian decision-making has operated on much the same principles, understanding of history and international affairs, and thus strategic calculations, as its Western counterparts. The assumption that the Russians are not so different and see the world and react to events in the same way as Westerners has obstructed understanding Russian intentions, prejudices, hopes, fears and motivations. On the other hand, the notion that Russia can be understood by the imposition of the same categories that explain Western societies and politics has remained strong. These assumptions often miss small

but important differences – and understanding of Russia becomes distorted.

Related to this, the second point is the increasing abstraction of Russia. Those who carried out post-mortems on Soviet studies would recognise, for instance, the hypnosis on a limited range of questions, the frequent use of historical analogies that masquerade as evidence and the reduction, indeed distortion, of a complex and evolving situation in Russia to a series of unambiguous symbols magnified by the often mythical or conspiratorial lenses through which they are looked at. Observers of the politicised debates between ‘totalitarians’ and ‘revisionists’ about developments in the USSR and the role of Mikhail Gorbachev would recognise similar debates about Russia from 2008, particularly the role of Dmitri Medvedev – whether he was really a more liberal reformer and, if so, whether he would succeed. But like Gorbachev then, in Western debates Medvedev (and his role as president) has increasingly become an abstraction and developments added as proof of views already held, rather than an opportunity for fresh thinking to improve understanding of Russia.<sup>84</sup> This is emphasised by a discussion that is increasingly partisan and emotional, one in which the harshness of criticism increasingly appears to replace cool analysis – again, much like the late 1980s.

The desire to see certain developments combined with the practical limits on and related inability to analyse Russia in breadth or depth has meant that the discussion about Russia has often been framed in formulaic judgments, and loose and imprecise terms, suffering language inflation and factual imprecision in the mainstream Western discussion that becomes ‘laundered’ into the historical record over time, whether it be over Russian foreign and military policy and the war in Ukraine, or the nature of Putin’s regime and protest demonstrations in 2011. Furthermore, as the limits of ‘transitionology’ have become increasingly clear, the worst excesses of Kremlinology have crept back in as hearsay, gossip and unchecked rumour take on lives of their own.

The third point relates to forecasting failure and surprise. Nate Silver warns that whenever information growth outpaces our understanding of how to process it, danger looms: to deal with an overwhelming amount of information, many engage with it only selectively, ‘picking out the parts we like and ignoring the remainder’. Thus the ‘story the data tells us is often the one we’d like to hear and we usually make sure that it has a happy ending’. In many cases, prediction is tied to the notion of progress.<sup>85</sup> There

is a strong tendency to focus on signals which fit orthodoxy and advance preferred theories: signals which do not match these orthodox patterns are often overlooked; the unfamiliar or undesirable is often confused with the improbable, which, since it is improbable, need not seriously be considered.

This is particularly relevant to post-Cold War Russia studies, in which the underlying theme has been about Russia's progress and transition to democracy. The Russia that is being predicted is often an abridged version, one of silhouettes and caricatures, and many predictions are based on repetitive, threadbare analogies or unchecked speculation masquerading as evidence, or simply reflect the triumph of wishful thinking.

This has been compounded by a lack of self-correction. As a result, much of the mainstream discussion about Russia has become based on exchanges of opinion (as opposed to research). Indeed, if anything, errors and mistaken predictions tend to be quickly forgotten rather than reconsidered, and certain mainstream narratives such as the strength of Putin's 'vertical of power', or the tension between Putin and Medvedev, have remained strong despite much visible evidence against them. Forecasters' hits are thus bought at a very high price in misses and false alarms, and bear all the hallmarks of 'broken clock' analysis. A notable aspect of Philip Tetlock's critical analysis of expert political judgement is the distinction between experts who stick to their assumptions regardless of the evidence, and those who adopt a more nuanced, flexible approach that bends with the evidence. Yet many of those debating Russia have not shown adaptability, despite the shaky nature of conventional wisdom.

Many of these problems will be difficult satisfactorily to address. Russia will always create surprises. Moreover, a reinvigoration of the scale of Russia studies will require time and sustained investment and it remains unclear that this will take place to the necessary levels, given the range of competing priorities and continuing austerity measures. Furthermore, even if some growth in Russia expertise were to be achieved, helping to address the problem of 'unknown unknowns', the more subtle and perhaps more important problem is the conversion of 'unknown knowns' and 'assumed knowns' into informed high-level decision-making – in other words, successfully overcoming political short-termism, mirror-imaging and ethnocentrism. This will be complex and difficult: reporting complexity and long-term trends to politicians is often an exercise in frustration, if not futility.

Nevertheless, if the state of surprise is to be meaningfully addressed, a return to core skills is necessary. This includes reviving the skills of area studies for the twenty-first century. Area studies is not ‘Putinology’, nor is it mausoleum-watching, nor the simplistic incorporation of plausible rumour and speculation. It is the careful observation of developments in Russia, shaping an understanding of who the Russians are, the interpretation of the political language and culture and a better grasp of how the state does and does not function and why. It means reversing the process of abstraction and deciphering Russia, and attempting to see the emergence of new figures not just in the opposition but within the system. Most of all, it means avoiding making the mistakes of ‘mirror-imaging’, a problem that is particularly dangerous during crisis situations.

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- 27 P. Cockburn, *Getting Russia Wrong: The End of Kremlinology* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 25–26; L. Labeledz, ‘The use and abuse of Sovietology’, *Survey* (March 1988), p. 86.
- 28 P. Rutland, ‘Sovietology: who got it right and who got it wrong and why’, in Cox, *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse*, p. 32; P. Rutland, ‘Sovietology: notes for a post mortem’, *National Interest*, 31 (spring 1993), p. 112.
- 29 C. Merridale, *Red Fortress: The Secret Heart of Russia’s History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), pp. 352–353.
- 30 R. Conquest, *Policy and Power in the USSR* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1961), pp. 3–14. See also G. Breslauer, *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders: Building Authority in Soviet Politics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), pp. ix–xi.
- 31 S. Fortescue, ‘T.H. Rigby on Soviet and post-Soviet Russian politics’, in S. Fortescue (ed.), *Russian Politics from Lenin to Putin* (Oxford: Palgrave, 2010); Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, especially chapter 12.
- 32 With this focus, the discipline of Russia studies was seen to have joined the political science mainstream, with Russia being studied as a ‘normal country’ by well-trained political scientists. Cox, *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse*, p. 3.
- 33 Stent, ‘Why America doesn’t understand Putin’.
- 34 T. Carothers, ‘The end of the transition paradigm’, *Journal of Democracy*, 13:1 (2002), p. 1, [www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/gratis/Carothers-13-1.pdf](http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/gratis/Carothers-13-1.pdf); Carothers is now vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and has built a career on international support for democracy, human rights and governance. Cohen, *Failed Crusade*, p. 23.
- 35 Carothers, ‘The end of the transition paradigm’, p. 2.
- 36 The ‘Rose’ Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the ‘Orange’ Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the ‘Tulip’ or ‘Pink’ Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in

2005. According to some, the Orange Revolution ‘represented a second wave of democratisation or democratic breakthrough in Ukraine’, A. Aslund and M. McFaul (eds), *Revolution in Orange: The Origins of Ukraine’s Democratic Breakthrough* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2006), p. 193.
- 37 The overthrow of President Yanukovich in Ukraine led to discussion about whether such a revolution was also possible in Russia. For discussion of how the democratisation in waves study returned to the forefront of political science in the aftermath of the Colour Revolutions and ‘Arab Spring’, see S. Greene, *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin’s Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).
- 38 Another important feature was the comparison of Putin’s autocracy with Boris Yeltsin’s democracy. Two prominent Russia watchers suggested that without democratic change, Russia faced the ‘Angola model’. M. McFaul and K. Stoner-Weiss, ‘The myth of the authoritarian model: how Vladimir Putin’s crackdown holds Russia back’, *Foreign Affairs*, 87:1 (January–February 2008); *Russia’s Wrong Direction: What the United States Can and Should Do*, Council on Foreign Relations Report No. 57 (2006), [www.cfr.org/iran/russias-wrong-direction/p9997](http://www.cfr.org/iran/russias-wrong-direction/p9997).
- 39 For an overview of the literature, B. Harasymiw, ‘In search of post communism: stalking Russia’s political trajectory’, *Canadian Slavonic Studies*, LIII:2–4 (June–October 2011). Kotkin called it the ‘myth of Russia’s overturned democracy’. S. Kotkin, ‘The myth of the New Cold War’, *Prospect* (27 April 2008), [www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/mythofthenewcoldwar](http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/mythofthenewcoldwar); R. Sakwa, ‘“New Cold War” or twenty years’ crisis? Russia and international affairs’, *International Affairs*, 84:2 (2008), pp. 241–267.
- 40 This view was still being reiterated in 2014. M. McFaul, ‘Confronting Putin’s Russia’, *New York Times* (23 March 2014).
- 41 M. Bennetts, *Kicking the Kremlin* (London: OneWorld Publications, 2014), p. xvi. He (correctly) diagnosed this as a ‘knee-jerk approval’.
- 42 ‘Russia risks Soviet-style collapse as Rouble defence fails’, *Telegraph* (16 December 2014).
- 43 ‘Interview with foreign media’ (19 January 2014), <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news6545>; ‘Has Russia abandoned the path to democracy?’, Roundtable discussion at National Endowment for Democracy (30 October 2014), <http://imrussia.org/en/news/2076-has-russia-abandoned-the-path-to-democracy>.
- 44 Z. Brzezinski, ‘Russia, like Ukraine, will become a real democracy’, *Financial Times* (11 December 2013); McFaul, ‘Confronting Putin’s Russia’; D. Remnick, ‘Watching the eclipse’, *New Yorker* (11 August 2014).
- 45 Cohen, *Failed Crusade*, p. 31.

- 46 For much of the 2000s, it was a regular point of discussion that ‘we should see Russia as it is, rather than as we would like to see it’.
- 47 This is emphasised by the common assumption that all information is available on the Internet and is in English. This is part of the problem of distinguishing between the large amounts of information and knowledge about complex subjects.
- 48 T. Remington, *Presidential Decrees in Russia: A Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 49 Bennetts, *Kicking the Kremlin*, p. 117.
- 50 It is noteworthy that many of the assessments of Navalniy also tend to draw on Navalniy’s own work: either his blog or other statements, or the hagiographical series of interviews with him edited by a political ally. K. Voronkov, *Alexei Navalniy: Groza zhulikov i vorov* [Alexei Navalniy: Buster of Crooks and Thieves] (Moscow: Eksmo, 2012).
- 51 M. van Herpen, *Putin’s Wars: The Rise of Russia’s New Imperialism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); ‘Vladimir Putin: our despot of the year’, *Bloomberg* (29 December 2014), [www.bloomberg.com/politics/videos/2014-12-29/vladimir-putin-our-despot-of-the-year](http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/videos/2014-12-29/vladimir-putin-our-despot-of-the-year).
- 52 Greene, *Moscow in Movement*, p. 3. One reporter, for instance, estimates the protest on 6 May 2012 as being 50,000–100,000 in size. A. Arutunyan, *The Putin Mystique: Inside Russia’s Power Cult* (Newbold: Skyscraper Publications, 2014), p. 238. Drawing on Western media sources, which themselves had drawn on protest organiser’s estimates, one UK parliamentary report thus suggested that the protest in Moscow on 24 December 2011 numbered 120,000 and ‘large demonstrations in other centres’. B. Smith, *The Russia Crisis and Putin’s Third Term* (London: House of Commons, SNIA/6289, 12 April 2012), p. 5.
- 53 This is a shorthand but inaccurate reference to Cardinal Richelieu as a means of characterising the roles of senior figures in the Presidential Administration. There are several alleged ‘grey cardinals’, including Alexander Voloshin, Igor Sechin, Vladislav Surkov and Vyacheslav Volodin. This offers a telling image but has little value beyond imparting a vague and misleading sense of non-transparent power. At best it is a silhouette, more often it is an alibi covering up the lack of more detailed attempts to understand these individuals and the roles they play.
- 54 This very important point has been emphasised by a senior Kremlin official. ‘Many facts were simply wrong and actors’ motivations were misrepresented’, the official suggested. A. Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 115.
- 55 Putin’s mental and physical health is often the subject of debate, as is that of others, such as Igor Sechin. When photos indicated that he had lost weight, there was much gossip about Sechin having cancer.
- 56 L. Harding, *Mafia State: How One Reporter Became an Enemy of the Brutal New Russia* (London: Guardian Books, 2011). This is not to

suggest that there is not crime, even at senior levels of the state and in law enforcement in Russia, as illustrated by the ‘Three Whales’ and Kushchevskaya cases. Rather it is to suggest that criminality is often asserted or *insinuated*.

- 57 In his novel *S\*N\*U\*F\*F\**, he described a futuristic society in which professional reporters engage in a daily process of generating superficial discourse and slogans about artificially created events. Since everything was staged, nothing could be confirmed or denied.
- 58 R. Brope, ‘Russia’, in R. Dover, M. Goodman and C. Hillebrand (eds), *Routledge Companion to Intelligence Studies* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 227.
- 59 A. Soldatov and I. Borogan, *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia’s Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), p. 110. For more discussion, see Brope, ‘Russia’.
- 60 D. Satter, ‘Why journalists frighten Putin’, *Wall Street Journal* (14 January 2014).
- 61 See A. Monaghan, *The Russian Vertikal: The Tandem, Power and the Elections*, Chatham House Programme Paper (June 2011), on which the following passage draws.
- 62 For an early example of Medvedev’s liberalism, F. Kempe, ‘Russia’s Medvedev deserves handshake, nosehold’, *Bloomberg* (29 February 2008), [www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&refer=columnist\\_kempe&sid=aunbnki00EWU](http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&refer=columnist_kempe&sid=aunbnki00EWU); Obama cited in ‘Obama: Putin is keeping one foot in the old ways’, *Guardian* (2 July 2009), [www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/02/barack-obama-vladimir-putin-russia](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/02/barack-obama-vladimir-putin-russia).
- 63 Yu. Latynina, ‘Twitter-president i vostorzheniye liberali’, *Yezhenedel’ni Zhurnal* (4 April 2010).
- 64 S. Kotkin, ‘Sticking power’, *Times Literary Supplement* (2 March 2012).
- 65 ‘Pentagon think tank claims Putin has Asperger’s – has Putinology gone too far?’, *Guardian* (5 February 2015).
- 66 See editorial comment, *Johnson’s Russia List* (14 March 2014).
- 67 Stephen Cohen notes that no Soviet leader since Stalin has been so personally villainised. S. Cohen, ‘Distorting Russia: How the American media misrepresent Putin, Sochi and Ukraine’, *The Nation* (11 February 2014), [www.thenation.com/article/178344/distorting-russia#](http://www.thenation.com/article/178344/distorting-russia#); H. Kissinger, ‘To settle the Ukraine crisis, start at the end’, *Washington Post* (5 March 2014), [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9\\_story.html?hpid=z2](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html?hpid=z2). A version of this is the portrayal of Putin as a pariah, a theme that regularly re-emerges in which Putin himself is directly held responsible for an atrocity, whether it be Alexander Litvinko’s murder or the shooting down of flight MH17 in July 2014.
- 68 For a collection of these views, all given by prominent Russia watchers, S. Glasser, ‘Putin on the couch’, *Politico* (13 March 2014). Glasser

- reminds us that in the early 2000s, Putin was seen by Bush's National Security Council members as a 'liberal economic moderniser'.
- 69 Reports were prepared in 2008 and 2011, but emerged in early February 2015 thanks to a freedom of information request. 'Putin suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, Pentagon report claims', *Telegraph* (5 February 2015). The report was prepared having watched film of Putin dating back to 2000, but none of the authors had met him, nor had they seen brain scans. Jane Harris, of the UK's national Autism Society, suggested that 'this kind of speculative diagnosis is fraught with risks and is unhelpful', and that the study was 'driven by the wilder reaches of military intelligence'. 'Putin has "some form of Autism" Pentagon experts conclude after watching films of him', *Independent* (5 February 2015). Harris's comments were not carried by the *Telegraph*. Another reporter wondered whether this was 'taking Putinology too far'. 'Pentagon think tank claims Putin has Asperger's – has Putinology gone too far?', *Guardian* (5 February 2015).
- 70 As discussed in Chapter 4, Patrushev, Ivanov and Medvedev have all long been part of Putin's inner team.
- 71 'Henry Kissinger: to settle the Ukraine crisis, start at the end', *Washington Post* (5 March 2014), [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html).
- 72 J. Yaffa, 'Reading Putin: the mind and state of Russia's president', *Foreign Affairs* (July–August 2012).
- 73 Author's correspondence with Henry Plater-Zyberk, December 2014. Journalist Thomas Friedman is one who has called Putin a thug, also indulging in comparing Putin with Nazi officials. 'Czar Putin's next moves', *New York Times* (28 January 2015).
- 74 'Weimar Russia? Why post-Soviet authoritarianism did not turn Fascist', Wilson Centre discussion (15 November 2011), [www.wilsoncenter.org/event/weimar-russia-why-post-soviet-authoritarianism-did-not-turn-fascist](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/weimar-russia-why-post-soviet-authoritarianism-did-not-turn-fascist); N. Ferguson, 'Look back at Weimar – and start to worry about Russia', *Telegraph* (1 January 2005). 'Times of Troubles' include during the reigns of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, Alexander I, Alexander II and Nicholas II. It was an analogy often drawn with Russia during the 1990s, but was also in evidence during the protest demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 and emerged again in 2014. 'Vladimir Putin's unhappy new year', *Wall Street Journal* (30 December 2014); 'Pussy Riot's stunning victory over Putin's bureaucrats', *Telegraph* (14 August 2012); 'Nemtsov: Kremlin watchers find an eerie parallel in an 80-year-old murder', *RFE/RL* (1 March 2015), [www.rferl.org/content/russia-nemtsov-kirov-eerie-parallel/26876076.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-nemtsov-kirov-eerie-parallel/26876076.html).
- 75 The events in North Africa and the Middle East also generated many analogies. Many commentators sought to describe complex and diverse Eastern events as a march towards democracy, and the term 'Arab Spring' was coined: a term that evokes Western developments

- such as the European Spring of 1848 and the Prague Spring of 1968. F. Gaub, 'The Arab Spring for dummies', *Security Times* (February 2013).
- 76 Condoleeza Rice, then Secretary of State, compared Russian actions to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Cited in 'Georgia conflict: key statements', BBC (19 August 2008), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7556857.stm>.
- 77 Western officials who have made such comparisons include David Cameron, Hillary Clinton, Stephen Harper and Wolfgang Shauble. '12 prominent people who compared Putin to Hitler', *Business Insider* (22 May 2014), [www.businessinsider.com/people-who-compared-putin-to-hitler-2014-5?IR=T](http://www.businessinsider.com/people-who-compared-putin-to-hitler-2014-5?IR=T). This is not new. 'Poland compares German-Russian pipeline to Nazi-Soviet pact', *EU Observer* (2 May 2006), <http://euobserver.com/foreign/21486>.
- 78 Peskov cited in I. Gorst, 'Putin spokesman: Brezhnev rules OK', *Financial Times* (5 October 2011); F. Hill and C. Gaddy, 'Putin and the uses of history', *The National Interest* (January–February 2012).
- 79 B. Lo, 'Crimea's Studenten crisis', *Project Syndicate* (18 March 2014).
- 80 Historians have done this elsewhere. For instance, M. Brown, 'Ukraine crisis is nothing like the invasion of Czechoslovakia', *The Conversation* (4 April 2014).
- 81 R. Neustadt and E. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1986), chapter 3, pp. 35–39; D.B.G. Heuser and C. Buffet, *Haunted by History: Myths in International Relations* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998).
- 82 Though compared to these other popular protests, the demonstrations in late 2011 and early 2012 were often hailed as 'unprecedented'. As discussed in Chapter 3, few commentators appeared to recollect the 'pensioner's protests' of 2005, nor their almost identical discussion about Russia of that time, including comparisons with the Orange Revolution and Putin's imminent departure from power.
- 83 Gaub, 'Arab Spring for dummies'.
- 84 Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, pp. 319–322.
- 85 Silver, *The Signal and the Noise*, pp. 4–5, 7.