

## Russian Politics Today

### Stability and Fragility

*Russian Politics Today: Stability and Fragility* provides an accessible and nuanced introduction to contemporary Russian politics at a time of increasing uncertainty. Using the theme of stability versus fragility as its overarching framework, this innovative textbook explores the forces that shape Russia's politics, economy, and society. The volume provides up-to-date coverage of core themes – Russia's strong presidency, its weak party system, the role of civil society, and its dependence on oil and gas revenues – alongside path-breaking chapters on the politics of race, class, gender, sexuality, and the environment. An international and diverse team of experts presents the most comprehensive available account of the evolution of Russian politics in the post-Soviet era, providing the tools for interpreting the past and the present while also offering a template for understanding future developments.

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## Stability and Fragility

Edited by

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## Preface

When the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991, the future of Russian politics was uncertain. The first decade of the country's post-Soviet transformation was marked by economic collapse and political disorder. Centrifugal forces and power struggles that had their roots in the late Soviet era accelerated and led to a historic unraveling of institutions and an acute questioning of established ideals. Upon ascending to the presidency of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin declared war on chaos and promised to restore a strong state. Over the course of two decades, the Putin administration strengthened some political institutions, while weakening others. Similarly, some elements of ideational politics were readopted and shored up with elements from Soviet-era politics and imperial Russian traditions.

Importantly, though, the real political history of the young Russian Federation defied virtually all predictions that had been advanced by scholars and policy-makers about how institutions would take shape in the early 1990s. Although democratic forces seem to have strengthened in the late 1980s and 1990s, Russian politics now combines formally democratic institutions with highly centralized and authoritarian power structures. Similarly, while the country privatized the large majority of state-owned factories and farms and created market institutions, Russia's economy contains statist features, and economic nationalism exists side by side with market forces and private entrepreneurship. Many new actors and concerns have shaped the political agenda in the post-Soviet era for sure, but the state remains a central force in many aspects of Russian life. Societal influence on politics forms a complex and dynamic picture in which some groups have gained prominence, while others are repressed and excluded.

In the years between 1991 and 2022, evolving institutions, newly emerging political actors, and shifting ideational politics together forged a political order that has come to be known as high Putinism – an order in which power rests almost exclusively in the presidency. The dynamics shaping Russian politics today and the trajectory of change that have contributed to the creation of the current order are high-stakes topics that require continued in-depth analysis for three simple reasons: They shape everyday realities for millions of Russian citizens, Russia remains an influential regional hegemon in Eurasia and an important actor in global politics. While this book focuses squarely on domestic political, economic, and social trends, the underlying assumption of the chapter selection is that an understanding of these trends is indispensable for anyone interested in Russia's domestic politics as well as its role as a global power.

As this book goes to print, in June 2022, Russia's war in Ukraine, which Russia started on February 24, 2022, is still referred to as a special operation by the state-controlled media, and an unprecedented crackdown has muted societal criticism. The Prologue details the main aspects of the war that are known to date; the full extent of the war's implications for Russian politics is not yet apparent. Indeed, the future of Russian politics is perhaps as uncertain as it was during the turbulent days of 1991. What we do know is that the war is exceedingly risky, and that the Putin regime will have to contend with and justify the mounting human and economic costs of the war. Time will tell whether the political institutions will prove robust enough to insulate the Russian population, or fragile and unable to deflect discontent.

A paired central concept – stability and fragility – informs the analysis in all the chapters of *Russian Politics Today*. The book familiarizes students with political, economic, and social trends in contemporary Russia, mostly focusing on the past thirty years, but also bringing Soviet and imperial history to the discussion, if the issue at stake requires it. The book relies on contributions by a distinguished group of international scholars who explain empirical trends and cutting-edge research by political scientists in accessible terms. The chapters cover well-established themes in Russian politics, such as the strong presidency, the weak party system, foreign policy, and civil society, combining them with chapters on environmental politics, on the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and on protests. Dedicated chapters address and explain the role of uniquely important and new actors in Russian politics, such as Russia's oligarchy and the Orthodox Church. The book also conveys diverse political, social, and economic trends across the country's large territory, with one chapter addressing the political tensions of center–region relations, another that examines everyday life on Russia's margins, and yet another that details some of the political dynamics unfolding in the Russian Arctic.

Together the chapters seek to teach the lesson that we should not think of Russian institutional change, ideational trends, and interest formation as in some way failed “outcomes” of a historical trajectory that was meant to lead to convergence with an imaginary West. Neither does it treat February 2022 as a preordained outcome of an inherently authoritarian and aggressive state. Instead, students are encouraged to learn about the political, economic, and social processes that have taken shape in Russia over the past thirty years through close study of historical trends. The aim is to help them develop a keen eye and open mind to grasp the newly emerging institutions, ideas, and interests. The concepts of stability and fragility give the volume coherence. All contributing authors have identified stabilizing forces that have helped elites maintain power and authority in one form or other, contrasting them with sources of disruption that may undermine the established order. Stability and fragility are concepts that serve as a kind of template to understand contemporary and future developments in Russian politics. They allow students to address

questions related to the nature of the political regime under Putin. They are tools to analyze changing political dynamics without the underlying narrative that Russia should have progressed toward democracy, or was meant to backslide toward an authoritarian order. *Russian Politics Today* thereby allows students to gain a dynamic and multifaceted understanding of the evolving political struggles of post-Soviet Russian politics.

*Russian Politics Today* consists of three parts: “Political Institutions,” “Political Economy,” and “Politics and Society.” The themes in each section speak to the “three Is” that are the focus of academic and public policy debates on contemporary Russia: *institutions*, *ideas*, and *interest*. A series of chapters introduces students to some of the most important *institutional changes*: on the presidency, center–region relations, the electoral institutions and the party system, legal institutions, the institutional underpinnings of Russia’s economy, and the institutional power of the Orthodox Church. Virtually all chapters address in some way or the dynamics of authoritarian control and the opposition it generates; the chapter on center–region relations addresses the centralization of power, the chapter on protests discusses the shrinking space for public expressions of popular grievances, as do the chapters on new and old media and the social roots of societal compliance. Several chapters explore shifting *ideational and identity aspects* of Russian politics, such as the chapters on race and exclusion, on gender, on conservatism, and on ethnicity and religion. Other chapters – on oligarchs, on labor, and on the rise of economic inequality – address how *interest and interest groups* have emerged and evolved. Finally, a chapter on the role of oil and gas addresses whether we can think of Russia as a typical “petrostate,” and a chapter on environmental politics explains how Russia’s extraordinary natural resources create environmental vulnerabilities and shape environmental politics. There are many points of connection between the chapters; these are explicitly flagged in the book and will allow students to gain a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the complex political landscape in contemporary Russia. Note that a number of themes and events, such as corruption and the annexation of Crimea for example, do not receive attention in a dedicated chapter, not because they are not important, but because they are relevant for multiple aspects of Russian politics and are discussed in several chapters.

Each chapter contains a number of elements that are designed to make the volume a useful teaching tool. Each chapter opens with an image that adds a visual component to the narrative of central themes, and an epigraph that allows students to hear the voice of the chapter’s protagonists. The bulk of the chapter narratives focus on conveying the main trends in Russian politics since 2000, when Vladimir Putin became president of the Russian Federation, yet each of the contributors also provides information on historical precedents. The chapters are pitched to students with little prior knowledge of Russian politics or history, but they are nevertheless written to convey at times complex political dynamics and intricate histories.



Theoretical debates in comparative politics and other academic disciplines do not take center stage, but inform authors' take on the topics they cover. The textbook also provides Discussion and Exam Questions for each of the chapters. Discussion Questions are open-ended and provoke students to reflect on key aspects of the themes discussed in the chapter, and at times to take a stance on controversial issues; they appear at the end of each chapter. Exam Questions are shorter and are meant to be a test of students retention of core elements of the chapter; they are available as an online resource for instructors at [www.cambridge.org/wengle](http://www.cambridge.org/wengle). This website also includes external links to vetted video and audio content, such as documentaries and news coverage. Finally, the companion website provides links to vetted video and audio content, such as documentaries or news coverage. The book is authored by a distinguished group of senior and mid-career scholars with international reputations as well as by younger scholars who are pursuing new and ambitious projects. Contributors all have an established track record of publishing in their subfields; they have institutional homes in the United States and Europe and have taught Russian politics in one form or other.

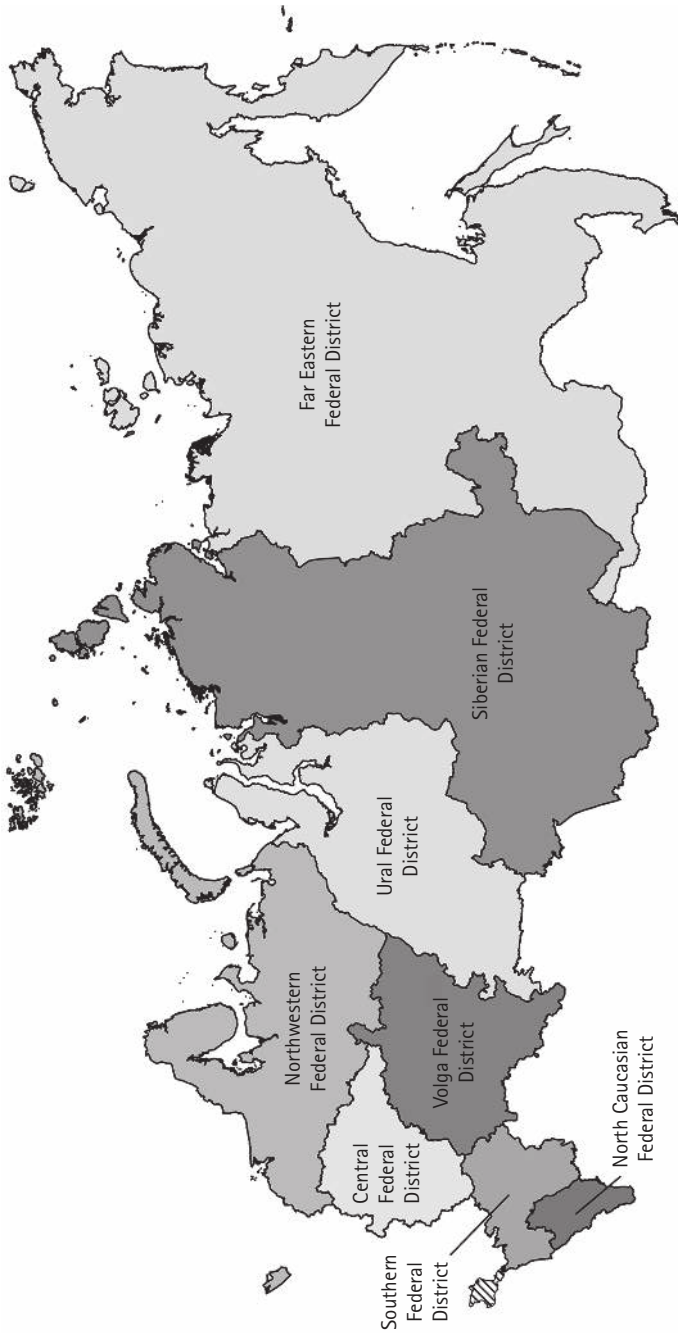
### KEY FEATURES, IN BRIEF

*Russian Politics Today* provides in-depth treatment of a broad range of themes in Russian politics across and within the three broad topics – political institutions, political economy, and society. It also presents a compelling overall framework by highlighting forces of stability vs. fragilities. The chapters are pitched to readers with very limited prior knowledge and include basic information on each topic, while also relying on cutting-edge research. The book thereby offers an accessible but nuanced treatment of a high-stakes topic.

The textbook is made up of twenty-one chapters, most of them relatively short. A few core chapters are somewhat longer, either because they lay the foundation for other chapters in the section (for example, on the presidency) or because they cover very large themes (for example, on foreign policy). Instructors can select themes that fit their syllabi and can pair chapters with one or more readings, either with an academic journal article or with a news media report, depending on the level of the class.

The book offers a teaching tool for instructors teaching Russian Politics, Russian Society, or Russian History; sections of classes such as World Politics or Foreign Governments; and many other courses.





**Map 0.2** Federal districts of the Russian Federation, 2022.

Note: Crimea has been occupied by Russia since 2014, but is not recognized as a territory of the Russian Federation by the international community.

Credit: Matthew Sisk, Lucy Family Institute for Data & Society, University of Notre Dame.

## Prologue: Russia's War in Ukraine

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, an era seemed to come to an end. Driven by a desire to bring Ukraine back into Russia's sphere of influence, Vladimir Putin's Russia launched an extremely destructive military campaign. Russia's aggression, while not surprising, and expected by many Ukrainians, was also not preordained. It was perhaps the worst possible of many outcomes of the past thirty years of Russian history. The chapters that follow will help to explain the complex political dynamics that precipitated these events.

As this book goes into print, the war is ongoing. The editor and contributing authors have done their utmost to update the chapters to reflect rapidly changing dynamics. That said, the textbook was conceived in the spring of 2021 and the chapters were written in the fall of that year. This prologue, finalized in May 2022, serves as a short primer on the war; updates will be available on the textbook's dedicated website.

On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin announced the invasion of Ukraine, calling it a "special military operation" to liberate the country from an illegitimate, Western-supported government. In the initial attack, the Russian military simultaneously targeted Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv in the north of the country, Kherson and Melitopol' in the south, as well as Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine. Within only a week of the invasion, it seemed clear that Russia's attack had not gone as planned. Not only did the Russian military face far more resistance than they had expected from Ukrainian forces and volunteer soldiers, but President Volodymyr Zelensky and his government also remained steadfast in their willingness to defend Kyiv and the country as a whole.

In an iconic YouTube video filmed in an outdoor location in Kyiv, Zelensky affirmed his and his chief advisors' commitment to remain "here" (*tut*). The significance of this statement emerged within days, as it became clear that Vladimir Putin and his advisors had expected that Zelensky would either flee the country or be captured. This was but one of the many ways in which the conflict did not unfold as the Kremlin had expected. Russia was unable to establish air superiority, which in turn hampered the advance of ground troops that appeared poorly coordinated and suffered from disruptions in supply lines. By early April, the Russian military was forced to retreat from the suburbs of Kyiv. Although the Russian government framed this as a tactical redeployment, it clearly exemplified its failure to take Ukraine's capital, topple the Zelensky government, and install a pro-Russian regime.

After the retreat of Russian forces, it emerged that Russian occupying forces had not only indiscriminately destroyed administrative and residential buildings, but directed extreme violence against ordinary civilians. In the towns of Bucha and Irpin, more than 1,200 civilians were found dead, some with their hands bound, many unburied or in mass graves. Surviving residents told investigators that they had been kept captive and tortured. Retreating Russian forces had also left booby traps and mines. Ukrainian authorities are filing criminal charges with the International Criminal Court against individual Russian soldiers for war crimes. Russian authorities, meanwhile, denied being involved in civilian deaths, which were claimed to have been staged by Ukrainian forces and were presented as “fake news” in the Russian media.

This lie was only one piece of a much bigger propaganda war that the Russian government is waging through state-controlled media channels. The war is portrayed as the liberation of Ukrainians who have been captured by fascist, aggressive pro-Western forces and committed genocide against Russian speakers in Ukraine. The West and NATO are shown as encircling Russia and threatening its security. Since many Russians receive their news from state-controlled media, much of the population is scarcely aware of the brutal realities of the war. Russia has blocked Western news and social media sites that report on the war. Although it is difficult to ascertain exactly how Russians view the war, it is likely that a majority of Russians support it. Respondents in a Levada Center poll published on April 22, 2022, shows that 45 percent “definitely support,” and a further 29 percent “probably support,” the war. The group that “definitely supports” the war had declined by 8 percentage points, down from 53 percent a month earlier. These results need to be interpreted with caution – opinion polls are a flawed tool in this context, because an unknown share of respondents fears repercussions for giving the wrong answer. Even in Moscow, populated with more educated, younger, and more liberal citizens than other parts of the country, a majority of respondents said the conflict was initiated by either the United States or NATO, and they see the “special military operation” as either successful or quite successful. Older generations of Russians are far more supportive of the war, while younger Russians are about equally split in either supporting or opposing the war ([www.levada.ru/2022/04/28/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-i-otvetstvennost-za-gibel-mirnyh-zhitelej/](http://www.levada.ru/2022/04/28/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-i-otvetstvennost-za-gibel-mirnyh-zhitelej/)).

Russian citizens who speak out against the war face extreme difficulties expressing their views. The government has effectively silenced anyone who voices criticism of the war, of the government's lies, and of the militant nationalism that justify it. By early May 2022, more than 5,500 people had been detained in protests across 77 cities, according to OVD-Info, a civil society organization monitoring protests and arrests (<https://ovd.news/news/2022/03/06/spiski-zaderzhannyh-v-svyazi-s-akciyami-protiv-voyny-s-ukrainoy-6-marta-2022-goda>). In March, a number of laws were passed that criminalized criticism of the war and the spreading of “fake

news” about the military and other state organizations, punishable by fines and up to fifteen years in prison. Vladimir Putin dismissed domestic opponents of the war as gnats and traitors who were deliberately trying to weaken the country and who should be forced to leave Russia. The last remaining independent Russian news outlets, such as Ekho Moskvyy, Dozhd, and *Novaya Gazeta*, had to close, and many journalists were forced into exile. Regular civilians, teachers for example, were denounced as traitors by colleagues if they made remarks critical of the war.

This is not to say that dissenting voices cannot be heard inside Russia. An employee of Channel One, Russia's most prominent state-run TV channel, interrupted a regular news program with a sign warning Russians about the lies of state media. There are many activists – students, feminist groups, artists, and others – who are staging public art, organizing flash mobs, and sharing information about the war on Telegram channels. One group put antiwar messages (for example, “Next stop – North Korea”) on banknotes, and others help Ukrainians who have been shipped to Russia from the war zone. Activists, though, face an extremely difficult situation in Russia's current political context. Rather than fighting the government from within, many pro-Western, young, liberal urbanites have left the country, precipitating an unprecedented exodus of highly skilled professionals.

The world's response to the war has varied. In many East European countries, and in Poland in particular, a grassroots humanitarian movement has mobilized to assist the millions of Ukrainians who have been forced to leave their homes and seek refuge abroad. The Russian government defied international norms by invading a sovereign country, which prompted the United States and Western Europe to provide billions of dollars in weapons and aid to Ukraine. These countries have also imposed exceedingly harsh sanctions on Russia, which amount to what is now called “economic warfare” by both sides of the conflict. Sanctions have escalated since the onset of the conflict, starting with sanctions on key financial institutions, the freezing of assets belonging to Russian elites and the government, and the removal of many of Russia's banks from the SWIFT system. After atrocities committed by Russian troops were revealed, Western governments have also started boycotting Russian energy. Russia's energy exports to Europe may be the most critical element of sanctions against Russia. Unlike the United States, many European countries are dependent on Russian energy. The EU has been slow to propose a boycott, though on April 8 the EU imposed its first ban on Russian coal, and in May 2022 the EU made a commitment to phase out oil, gas, and coal purchases over time. While the West has been united in its response to Russia, China and India have been hesitant to condemn the Russian invasion and have cooperated with Russia to help the country soften the blow of Western sanctions. China has been buying large quantities of rubles, and India is still importing Russian oil and other commodities.

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It is already clear that the war it will inflict tremendous costs. According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner, 2,345 Ukrainian civilians had died as of late April 2022, although this is presumed to be an undercount. The violence has caused more than 5 million Ukrainians to flee the country, and many others have been forced to leave their homes. While the Russian Ministry of Defense has reported the deaths of only 1,351 soldiers as of late April, the UK Defence Ministry estimates that likely around 15,000 Russian troops have been killed. The economic sanctions have led to inflation and threaten to isolate the Russian economy, with effects that are felt by regular Russian citizens. The aggregate impact of the war and of sanctions on Russia's economy is expected to add up to an 8–15 percent decline in the country's GDP in 2022. The long-term impact of the isolation of Russia's economy is not yet known. The effects of the war are also being felt across the world. Energy and fertilizer prices have skyrocketed. As the fighting has disrupted Eurasian grain production, many countries in Africa and the Middle East are experiencing food shortages.

While the long-term consequences of the war for Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the world are yet unfathomable, it is certain to mark a watershed in Russian politics as well as Russia's relations with its neighbors and with the West.

Susanne Wengle, with Katherine Mansourova  
*Chicago, May 2022*