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BEAR NETWORK

REPORT: BEAR Sponsored Panel

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PANEL “STUDYING UKRAINIAN AND RUSSIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS IN TIMES OF WAR AND PEACE”

November 12, 10:15am to 12:00pm CST

The Palmer House Hilton (Chicago, IL), 3rd Floor, Salon 3

BEAR Network members at The Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) 2022 Convention (November 10-13):

Maria Popova started the roundtable discussion by asking what we had learned about Ukraine in the past 8 months of war. In one word: Resilience! Ukraine has wildly outperformed expectations, not only on the battlefield. Where does this resilience come from and what are its implications for the study of Ukrainian domestic politics, and for political science more broadly?

The key to Ukraine’s resilience is the symbiotic link between state institutions and civil society. We have seen the pictures of restored bridges and buildings, often within days after Russian bombing. We have seen municipal workers planting flower beds. Trains are running. Students, studying in newly equipped bomb shelters. Forensic police teams immediately at sites of atrocities, documenting and storing evidence, storing bodies of dead Russian soldiers in refrigerated containers, etc. It turned out that the Ukrainian state has more capacity than we realized.

We need to go back and examine the mechanisms through which Ukraine’s state capacity increased over the years, laying the foundations of the current successful war effort. The references to Charles Tilly’s famous theory that war makes the state are apt, but they do not capture the whole story. The Ukrainian state did not develop this capacity overnight after bombs started raining on Ukrainian cities. Olha Onuch’s research on public opinion shows that Ukrainians’ endorsement of democracy as the best form of government increased dramatically from about 40% to over 75%, but that didn’t happen overnight after the war started, but followed a trend since 2019. In addition, her data shows that it grew hand in hand with trust in institutions. Thus, we need to go back to the 2014-2022 period and even further to understand how state capacity increased. How did the breakthrough of civil society mobilization that happened both in 2004 and in 2013-2014 gradually transition towards sustainable cooperation between state institutions and civil society? Emily Channel Justice’s book on the 2013-2014 protest is entitled “Without the state” and it analyzes how civil society organizations sprung organically and circumvented or avoided interacting with the state, which they viewed with deep distrust. At some point after 2014, perhaps through the decentralization reforms, civil society and different levels of the state started interacting and building mutual trust.

In the area of rule of law reforms, Daniels Beers and I analyzed in a 2020 article the massive legislative and institutional reforms that took place under Poroshenko's term. 8 new laws, new institutions, anticorruption bureau, anticorruption court, etc. Not everything was smooth, and we concluded that while the institutional change was sweeping, normative change was slower as there were still examples that showed the presidential admin expected to exercise influence over judge. Now, it seems political will may be catching up with the institutional reforms. Civil society activists have been appointed to crucial judicial institutions thus, for the first time in Ukraine's independence history creating allies between the judiciary and judicial reform monitoring organizations.

The next speaker, Paul Goode, focused on the lessons of the last 8 months for the study of Russian politics. He opened his remarks by emphasizing that our knowledge of public opinion in autocratic regimes needs to be developed further, but political behaviour methods and approaches stumble with practical barriers—low response rates due to fear, difficulty in fielding surveys for ethical reasons, limited success of list experiments. Ethnographic methods are nearly impossible to implement due to travel restrictions, ethical and safety considerations. One way to overcome these obstacles is to step up our focus on studying Russian media output, as that does not require travel and steers clear of ethical conundrums.

A second lesson from the last 8 months is that the study of Russian domestic politics may have overemphasized the kleptocratic character of the regime and underestimated the imperialist ideology undergirding its foreign policy. We now need to go back and try to determine whether at some point, and when, when kleptocracy turned imperialist or whether imperialism was always present, but we had a particular blind spot for it.

To move the field forward, Goode argued, we need to make sure that there is no loss of expertise on Russia. In the short term, it is clear that opportunities to conduct research in/on Russia will be limited, not only by the isolation of the Russian state and society from the West, but also because there will be significant reluctance among younger researchers coming into the field to develop expertise on a country that is currently committing the worst aggression and atrocities since Nazi Germany in World War II.

However, this is not the time to abandon the study of Russia. Not for Russia's sake, but to correct the record and steer the field away from the tropes that came from Russian studies and orientalized its neighbours. Russianists should continue working on Russia, rather than start claiming expertise on Ukraine or on Central Asia or on other countries that were formerly Russia's colonies or satellites.

Finally, Goode proposed organizing the study of Eurasia in thematic clusters, rather than by country. The goal is to study topics that bind the region together: security, food security, cyber security, environmental politics, migration, passportization, visa regimes, authoritarianism and democracy, collective action and inequality; ethnicity/nationalism vs imperialism and colonization; post-war reconstruction; corruption and anticorruption. This is one way to fit Russian expertise into Eurasian studies without imperialization.

The third presentation was given by Milada Vachudova, who started with the argument that the decrease in Russian power should be reflected in our scholarly community as well. There has been tremendous emphasis on the study of Russia not only traditionally through research centres, language study, chairs, but even over the past year as the war has raged, we have seen a disproportionate number of job postings in Russian literature and politics. We need to decenter Russia institutionally. Institutions are sticky so this will be a long-term painstaking process. Some Russianists will need to retool— they can use Russian as a springboard to learn other languages and pursue comparative research agendas. We also need to work on diversifying who has a voice in scholarly debates—we need diversity of area studies, gender, and specialization.

Vachudova also argued that we should expect positive changes in Europe, both at the EU level and at the domestic politics level. These changes are the result of the resilience and suffering of Ukrainians. Ukrainians are carrying these positive changes on their backs by fighting. European institutions are recentered. NATO has a better sense of purpose now. EU enlargement was completely moribund--

North Macedonia, Montenegro should have been EU members already—but is now unlocked. Pumping of corruption into the German political party system through Russian energy flows will decrease. Interest in renewable energy has been invigorated as a response to Russia's energy blackmail.

Finally, we will study how EU institutions will influence Ukrainian domestic politics through the membership conditionality process. Lots of work is to be done. Civil society will have to be a critic of the government as the government works to implement the EU *acquis Communautaire*. The party system will go through an overhaul after the war's over—there will be broad consensus about EU accession and that is crucial to progress, but opposition will also come back on individual issues and this is essential for the continued health of Ukrainian democracy.

The final presentation was by Evgeniya Albats. She started her remarks by emphasizing that the shame of this war will be a stain on several generations of Russians, not just those living through it now. The cold, hard winter that Ukraine is facing is Russia's fault. Albats argued that this war was coming for a long time, given the autocratic, KGB-dominated regime that Putin consolidated. Albats predicted the disintegration of the Russian Federation, which would have major impact on the world. She also explained that she mourned the end of Russia's connection to Ukraine. 11mln Russians have relatives in Ukraine and many of them may perceive it as a tragedy that we are witnessing the severing of this connection. Albats' final point about the war was that it would have an impact on world politics and Russia cannot be ignored. Russia's aggression against Ukraine is the final aftershock of the end of the USSR and the end of the Cold War.

In her discussion of Russian domestic politics, Albats stressed that we should not be surprised at all at the status quo. Yeltsin chose a KGB officer as successor. It was clear at that point that Russian democracy was doomed. Putin was effective in the beginning in lying to the West that his goal was simply to put the country in order. In 2008, Putin executed a silent coup and consolidated his grip on state power. Currently, Russia is governed by the KGB elite. 66% of leadership of the country graduated from the KGB academies. Albats drew an analogy between the role of the Army in Latin America and KGB's role in Russia. She explained that the KGB took over industry too—oil, gas, telecommunications, research. By 2012, the KGB elites also established full control of TV networks and created an effective propaganda machine. They passed major electoral reforms, which cemented their grip on power. In the 2012-2017 period, the law on the presidency was completely overhauled. In 2020, Putin executed a self coup through constitutional reforms, which suggested clearly that he was preparing for this war. He also tried to kill his main opponent, Navalny, in order to have full control over society. Those who failed to predict the war means were blind to the growing power of the KGB, which by 2008 was in full control of the Russian state.

The Q&A session covered disparate topics in a productive and collegial discussion. We started by debating why few people predicted this war. In addition to Albats' hypothesis that Russianists underestimated the strength and motivations of the KGB elites, we discussed the underestimation of Russian imperialism—many seem to have misinterpreted the USSR collapse as Russia voluntarily letting go of the empire, instead of as a period of instability, in which Russia thought it temporarily lost control of some territories, but they would come back eventually or be tied to it inextricably in a new system. In addition, we discussed the role of within-system modernizers in Russia and their inability to moderate the Russian regime. Regarding Ukraine, we discussed that future research would have to look into whether we misjudged Ukrainian state capacity and institutions or whether during the war, Ukraine managed to mobilize and make the most out of what it had to work with.

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