

Institute of Diplomacy and Global Affairs

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The plains had turned to tundra and the sun barely grazed the horizon at high noon as we approached the far northern town of NN. My fixer Ivan, a former security officer, was complaining about the travails of setting up a small private business: a tourist agency for outdoorsmen who wanted to learn how to survive in the wilderness of northern Russia. (*Editor's note: At the author's request, the name of the town has been omitted. For security reasons, "Ivan" has been used in place of the source's actual name.*)

It wasn't just the officials of NN who kept Ivan's customers off the local rivers in order to maintain their own poaching business — that was to be expected. No, for Ivan the hurdles to setting up a private business came down to something even more ubiquitous than corruption.

DO MINORITIES HAVE A PLACE IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA?

"An associate arranged to pick up my group at noon," Ivan said. The guy was supposed to take the tourists sailing, but he had failed to show up, even though money had changed hands. When Ivan finally got him on the phone after several hours, his potential associate made it out to be Ivan's fault. "So I changed my mind," the associate said, according to Ivan. "What? I am a free man; I want to be alone with the sea." Everyone in Russia has a friend like this, and if you don't, you should get one.

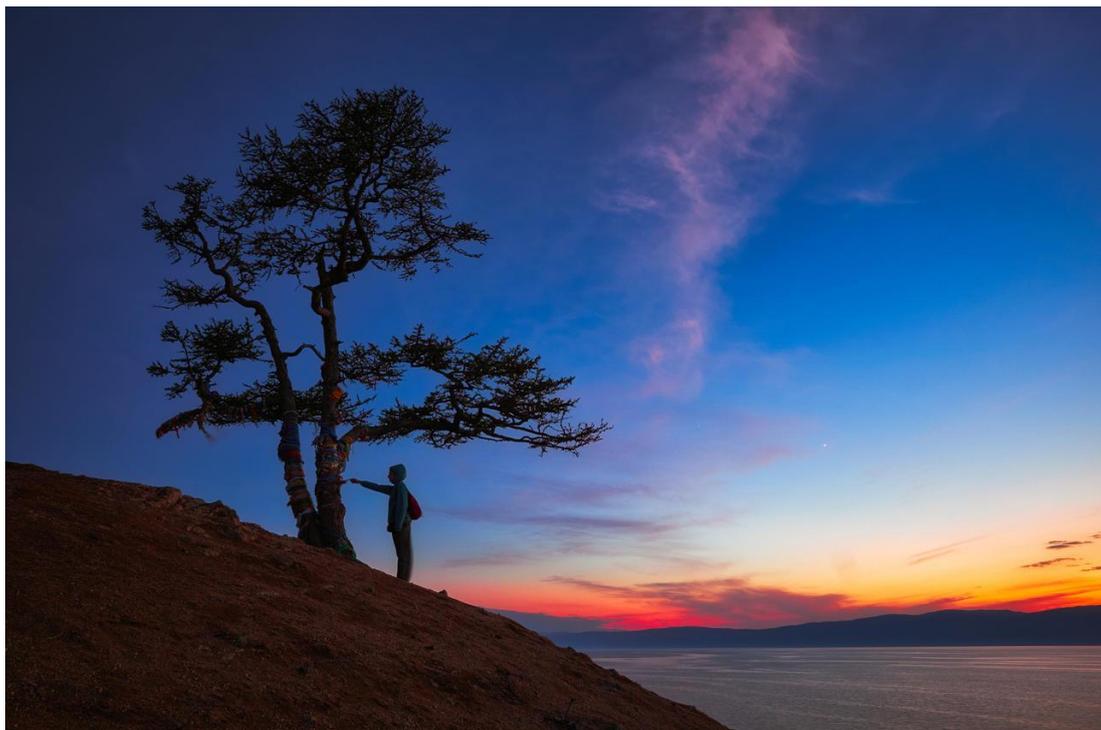
This is a trope, a stereotype, even a slightly Russophobic generalization — the unbridled, unreliable individual whose very will fills the Russian expanse. BuzzFeed would, perhaps, breathlessly call it the "most Russian thing that ever happened." Writing in the 1850s, the German traveler Baron von Haxthausen described the Russians he met on his travels as "avers[e] to rules and regulations. ... [the Russian] desires no settled position in the world or in business, but demands the utmost freedom, with liberty to go where he pleases." This inherently individualistic trope, like Bill Murray in the film *Groundhog Day*, wakes up over and over again, groaning at its own repetitiveness. It does so despite the existence of another trope: that Russian society is collectivist.

Inside the trope, however, there is a visceral, day-to-day reality that forms the building blocks of Russia's peculiar civil society and, by extension, Russian society's relationship with its government. On that particular afternoon, Ivan's associate wanted to be alone with the sea, and so he broke whatever obligations he had made earlier to a fellow human being. The officials of NN, whose real job of fostering their town's economic development ostensibly should have aligned with Ivan's business ventures, instead focused on their own narrow, illicit rent-seeking activity of salmon poaching. In each case, pure selfishness trumped collaboration toward mutually profitable goals. Not just "rules and regulations"

were eschewed, but simple agreements with another member of one's own community.

The results of these kinds of relationships — or their lack — could be seen all around: the carcasses of broken fishing trawlers beached beneath dirty cliffs; the dozens of rotting wooden buildings and half-abandoned apartment blocks that were a perennial source of complaint among the remaining residents — complaints that were brushed off by local officials who responded, quite reasonably, that they couldn't do anything about the buildings before finding the owners first. And at the fishing factory nearby, workers blamed official overregulation and corruption for their woes as they struggled simply to trust one another.

"Individualism becomes an escape in a communal culture with a strong pattern of coercion."



An individual and a shamanistic tree in Siberian Russia. (Credit: Daniele Bertin/CC BY-NC-ND)

The Quest for Spiritual Bonds

Shortly after Vladimir Putin returned to office for his third presidential term in 2012, the Kremlin embarked on a search for national identity, and suddenly all sorts of consolidating mechanisms spewed forth, top-down on a society clearly exhibiting problems with, [according to the terminology of the government elite](#), "spiritual bonds." [By the end of 2012](#), Putin declared "patriotism" as the "consolidating base" of government policy. And the world saw what happened in 2014: the rebirth of something called the "Russian world" amid a peculiar hybrid war in a neighboring former satellite, as hundreds of volunteers — aided by a shadow invasion of contract soldiers and an assortment of special forces whose

presence the Kremlin denied — gleefully took up arms to fight alongside pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine to defend what they sincerely believed to be the “Russian world.” The Kremlin’s manipulation of a binding idea, manifested in an armed conflict and in neoimperialist rhetoric about the clash of civilizations from some of its more radical proxies, worked. Putin’s ratings skyrocketed to 89 percent and stayed there in the face of growing isolation, paranoia, and an economy in freefall.

The Kremlin’s outward actions are underpinned by internal uncertainties rooted in Russian society.

The Kremlin’s quest for binding mechanisms was underpinned more by the need to stay in control rather than the desire to remedy social ills, but this does not mean that the Russian leadership initially invented the problem of a lack of social bonds, spiritual or otherwise. [An August 2013 poll by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion Research](#) showed that 32 percent of respondents defined themselves as “their own person and didn’t identify with any group,” more than any other categorization. Eleven percent identified themselves as middle class, 6 percent identified as pensioners, and just 4 percent identified themselves as ethnic Russians. [According to the Levada Center](#), only 27 percent of Russian respondents said that they believed that other people should be trusted, a substantially smaller number than the 29-country international average of 45 percent. In other studies, Russians also were far less likely to volunteer to help strangers in their community. Two different studies of Russia in 2011 and 2012 found that a meager 1–3 percent of Russians said that they had volunteered with nongovernmental organizations in the past year. When informal voluntary work was factored in, about 21 million Russians, less than 15 percent of the country’s population, spent time volunteering, according to [the 2012 “World Giving Index” compiled by the Charities Aid Foundation](#) (by comparison, [that figure](#) was 42 percent in the United States, 58 percent in Turkmenistan, and 46 percent in Uzbekistan). Where individualism and collaboration are concerned, [one study looked at the behavior of Russian immigrants in American corporations](#) and found them exhibiting Russian-style individualism, self-confidence, and a lack of desire to share resources — all this despite the declared Soviet value of collectivism.

On an anecdotal level, comparing one’s daily routine in Moscow versus Washington, DC, yields a startling contrast. In the United States, we are bombarded with the word “community” on a daily basis, while its Russian equivalent, *soobshchestvo*, is all but absent from day-to-day life in Russia. Watch a parent committee organize volunteer efforts for an American second-grade party: one week before the event, there are no volunteering slots left. Then watch an analogous conference in Moscow, where the teacher is lucky to get two parents to take part in a field trip.

These conditions point to a society in fundamental flux, and its current existential transformation appears on both internal and external axes. Externally, Russia is reasserting itself as a geopolitical player with a hybrid war in Ukraine and a more traditional foray into Syria. But the Kremlin’s outward actions are underpinned by internal uncertainties rooted in society: the lack of social bonds and the quest for a national identity. Historically, these are symptoms of a very familiar and very dangerous process: the terminal stages of empire, which could go two ways, either ending in dissolution, which is inevitably violent, or transforming into a nation, something that Russia has never actually been.

The lack of social bonds and the quest for a national identity — historically, these are symptoms of empire’s terminal stages.



A young woman pokes a statue of Vladimir Lenin in the eye. (Credit: Maria Komarova/CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The Russian World and the Russian Community

The concept of “Russian world,” or *Russky mir*, reemerged in 2014 as an ideological component of Russia’s role in Ukraine’s separatist conflict and the annexation of Crimea. The original term is loosely defined as a transnational community of people who are Russian, with the word *mir* better understood not as “world,” but as “all people,” with deeply embedded civilizational associations. It is no coincidence that this concept came to be applied in 2014 as an ideological palliative for the bonds of community. The concept of *mir* as *community*, much like the more localized Russian term *obschina*, is ancient, and is filled with all sorts of mystical and transcendent connotations, often described as a single religious body.

But what was the real *mir* that Russian ideologists and politicians have striven, time and again, to tap into? And how do its patterns continue to impact modern community patterns?

Its aura of exceptionality conceals an interplay of quite ordinary geographical and economic factors. Taken together, these factors might make the Russian community unique, but in and of themselves they are hardly exceptional or mystical. Fermenting over hundreds of years into culture, they are forgotten and overlooked, and yet they are still present in the relationships that Russians struggle to forge with one another to this day.

GUARDIAN OF THE DISPOSSESSED: AN ECONOMIC DISSIDENT IN MODERN

INDIA

There is very little record of how, exactly, peasant communes in what is now northern and central Russia functioned before they were gradually taken over as large-scale land ownings, first by Varangian princes and then, in the 11th century, by the nascent Slavic aristocracy. It is not exactly true that the institution of private property for land did not exist in ancient Russia; aside from ownership of land by princes and aristocracy, even within independent peasant communes in the post-Kievan period, an individual member of the commune could bequeath his land holding to his descendants — even to female heirs, if he wished. This fact undermines the idea, espoused and sometimes romanticized by thinkers and historians as varied as Alexander Herzen to Richard Pipes, of purely communal ownership.

Later records of relationships within the village point to long-running themes that seem to have affected Russian village life to a larger extent than their Western counterparts. These themes appear to have predisposed the individual to *dissolve* within his community, rather than build his individual identity *through* belonging in a community.

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The first of these themes in Russia is subsistence farming and the myriad factors that resulted from it. The soil in central and northern Russia yielded about three times the planted seed, and while better technology has been able to increase the yield, this improvement was made far later — and with greater sacrifices — than in western Europe. Political cataclysms, coupled with this fundamental factor of Russian soil and climate, repeatedly resulted in a return to subsistence farming and recurring food insecurity, as was witnessed following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although these agricultural difficulties are primarily an economic problem, subsistence farming not only affects but also molds relationships between individuals within a community in fundamental ways.

The second theme, thus, emerges from the first, and it is the paradox of what [John Maynard, in his 1948 work *The Russian Peasant*](#), referred to as “flittage” — the propensity of the individual peasant to run from his community. The paradox lies in the fact that over centuries, this tendency toward flittage was accompanied by persistent forces, from both the government and the community itself, to tie down the peasant to his land, gradually culminating in the completion of the establishment of serfdom by 1649.

When separated from abstract musings on national character such as those made by Haxthausen, the tendency toward migrating was an economic necessity. Here is [what historian Jerome Blum wrote of the early peasant](#): “Whatever he was called, the peasant from the Kievan era on into the fifteenth century had the right to come and go as he pleased, so long as he had not indentured himself. He could choose where he wanted to live, and he could move from one place to another whenever he wanted. He was attached neither to the commune of which he might

be a member, nor to the lord on whose land he was living, nor to the prince in whose realm he happened to reside.”

While it is wrong to see the Russian peasantry as nomadic, cyclical waves of internal migration, such as those during the Time of Troubles, demonstrate this economic necessity and the havoc it wreaked on the village. Together with the natural limitations of agricultural productivity and the scantiness of the population, it incentivized princes to strive to limit the movement of peasants in order to increase seigniorial income. But the pressure to restrict movement did not come only from above. In many cases, the community itself — having experienced chronic deficits of labor amid migration waves — set restrictions through moral norms that governed communal behavior. Historian Jeffrey Burds, documenting a deep ambivalence about permanent migration within the *obschina*, notes a case in 1893 in which fellow villagers tried to stop a family, struggling to feed itself following a series of bad harvests, from moving. The villagers permitted the family members to leave only after they assured the community that they would not “forsake the village” forever.

Rigid patriarchal ties within a village community are not unique to Russia, but the specific agricultural conditions and the burdens coming from landowners on the one hand and the government on the other exacerbated them. According to historian Christine Worobec, who wrote about the Russian peasantry in the post-emancipation period, even as late as the 19th century, the subsistence economy of the peasantry imposed extremely rigid behavioral norms on members of the commune, expected to be tight-knit as the only tried-and-true survival strategy. “The precariousness of subsistence agriculture, and the peasantry’s burdensome obligations to family, community, and state reinforced rigid and oppressive power relations within the village,” she wrote. “Russian peasants developed a set of behavioral norms and a moral code to buttress the status quo. They feared and punished severely delinquent activity that threatened the collective interest and community solidarity by challenging the subordination of woman to man, child to parent, young to old, and weak to strong.”

Such rigid bonds within the community hindered effective ties with other communities, contributing to a culture of distrust that went hand in hand with the physical barriers between communities, like poor roads and, by extension, deficient communication. (Richard Pipes notes that as late as the 17th century, Russian messengers traveled nearly five times slower than Persian messengers had in the 5th century BC.)

As communication between members of the educated, urban class and the peasantry increased, so did the distrust.



(Credit: "On Mir" by Sergey Korovin, painted in 1893. Public Domain)

HOW A "DAMNED SILLY THING" IN THE BALKANS SPARKED WWI

But even amid the industrialization of the 19th century, as communication, migration, and interaction increased, clashes between communities became more apparent. And as communication between members of the educated, urban class and the peasantry increased, so did the distrust. In one case in 1915 in the Voronezh province, teachers trying to set up kindergartens were accused by locals of being agents of the Antichrist, as recounted by historian Chris Chulos. According to Worobec, around the same time, urban psychologists reaching out to rural peasants often encountered a language barrier: even though both sides spoke Russian, the social distance between them made it nearly impossible to understand one another.

Despite a hundred years of modernization, clashes resulting from similarly catastrophic distrust still occur. In November 2015, [Russian media reported](#) that a man in Yekaterinburg snitched on a neighbor after stealing the man's Wi-Fi and finding, to his surprise, that he could use it to access what to his mind looked like "anti-Russian" Internet content. According to the man's complaint, filed to the federal media regulatory agency Roskomnadzor, his neighbor was an "enemy of the people" because his Wi-Fi allowed him to access anti-Russian content. In closing, the man requested that his neighbor's apartment should be taken away and given to him instead. The agency, fortunately, denied the man's request. Not so fortunate is the case of Ilya Farber, an art teacher who moved from Moscow to a rural village in 2011 and renovated a local recreational center. Local officials, suspicious of how or why someone could do something like that for free, [launched an allegedly trumped-up fraud case](#) against him, and had him jailed for three years.

“Voluntary-obligatory.” Yes, that term existed in the Soviet lexicon.

A Communal Culture of Coercion

When asked about the origins of the modern, post-Soviet thrust toward extreme individualism and mutual distrust, most Russian sociologists and historians I have spoken with point to the lingering legacy of Soviet conformity. When the collective was imposed by the state top-down through coercive means — when people were taught over several generations, not just to patrol one another, but to engage in bizarre “voluntary-obligatory” (yes, the term existed in the Soviet lexicon) community work picking potatoes on Saturdays — it is no surprise that at their first chance without the restrictive presence of the party, people would strive to move and insulate themselves as far away from their fellow man as possible. As private cottages sprouted in the 1990s, they were immediately surrounded by impenetrable fences. Within, the land was opulent and tidy, but just outside, between two neighbors, an enormous trash heap towered, as if some integral part of the infrastructure.

There is no doubt that much of this behavior is indeed a reaction to generations of Soviet-style conformity. But this explanation does not account for the fact that not all post-Soviet societies share these problems to the extent that Russia does. Statistics on volunteering and trust are much higher in former Soviet Uzbekistan, while studies point to stronger modern-type social capital in former Soviet Baltic countries. More importantly, the historical communal patterns described above suggest that the recurring idea of an absolutist state repeatedly destroying the independent commune and thus Russian community itself is not fully accurate. Russian absolutist government, while existing in a paradigm that was completely detached from the realities of Russian communal life, nevertheless copied some of the most coercive aspects of the commune in its bid to keep society together even as it struggled to modernize it.

Not all post-Soviet societies share these problems to the extent as Russia.

During the early years of the Soviet experiment, natural communities were obliterated through repression and civil war, but as the government sought to rebuild them, it applied many of the same cultural norms that had been cultivated by the environment for centuries. As onetime peasants moved to the cities amid the rapid, government-facilitated proletarianization, new urban communities began emerging that lacked the common values and communal ties that citizens shared in the village. Social vices grew rampant, and Soviet authorities sought to impose new socialist values on an artificially constructed *kollektiv*, the collective. The chief instrument, much as it would have been in the peasant village, was mutual surveillance, [but as Russian sociologist Oleg Kharkhordin has noted](#), “coming from the village, new workers considered mutual surveillance a natural phenomenon but did not care very much about higher Conscience,” or the common socialist values that the government was trying to impose.

Seeking to impose these norms on the *kollektiv*, Party control committees, according to Kharkhordin, often resorted to similar approaches used by the Ecclesiastic Courts of the Russian Orthodox Church, treating the *kollektiv* as a single body and casting out its defective members rather than punishing them. “The CCC [Central Control Committee] did not punish: once it had expelled a communist, it had nothing further to do with his or her fate. Of course, CCC officials knew that the expelled Communists almost always risked being dismissed

from their jobs and might end up in an NKVD prison,” Kharkhordin writes. Such an approach toward a *kollektiv* was more akin to that of doctor treating a single organism, medicating or expelling the disease within, rather than managing a group of individuals bound into a natural collective by common interest.

When applied to Russian communities over centuries, the dichotomy of individualism vs. collectivism does not seem to work; extreme cases of both tendencies are present in equal measure.

The dichotomy of individualism versus collectivism, when applied to Russian communities over centuries, does not seem to work because extreme cases of both tendencies are present in equal measure. Recent studies on collectivist values suggest that Russians tend to ascribe to those values more than Americans or Europeans, but realities on the ground demonstrate that they do not act on those values. Collectivist values are strong, but in practice, social capital is weak. Individualism becomes an escape in a communal culture with a strong pattern of coercion; human beings are forced by circumstance to associate with one another rather than doing so on a voluntary basis.

History has shown that coercion seems to come from all directions — the landowning aristocracy, the government, and the commune itself, dictated by the necessity to survive on fickle soil. Extreme individualism and unbridled freedom emerge as an effective alternative and counterweight, and this dance of extremes has been present for centuries.



A Russian advertisement for Coca-Cola promises one benefit to community: the

slogan, roughly translated, says that Coke is "Tastier together." (Credit: Graham Chandler/CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The New Russian Communities

Discussions on how nature, climate, and soil impact a specific society and the civilizational ideas that arise from it often verge into path dependency. Indeed, one is always tempted to look at Russia's "path" through that bleak lens. Whether because of the deficiencies of its soil or its resource curse, Russian society somehow is seen as locked into repeating the same patterns of dysfunctional governance over and over again. But however bleak the picture of communal coercion painted above might sound, the patterns it produces are actually adaptive mechanisms. In some cases, these patterns lock society in traditionalism; in others, they help open up unexpected opportunities for innovation.

In light of the current geopolitical precariousness, economic crisis, and domestic repressions, nascent Russian communities are grappling with the baggage of centuries-old relationship patterns in inherently new ways. The past 10 years have seen a revival of so-called "family estates," in which government-allotted plots of land are turned into communities with a curious mix of Russian communal traditions and esoterics. The trend of urban Moscow professionals downshifting and flocking to the countryside has spawned a new generation of family-run farmsteads. These farms, and the small businesses that grew and proliferated during the oil boom under Putin's first two terms, are currently grappling with the challenges (and, possibly, opportunities) of an economy of low oil prices and a government-imposed embargo on European food imports.

Russia is seen as locked into repeating the same patterns of dysfunctional governance over and over.

A curious paradox is emerging. Despite economic hardships and the threat of repressions, these nascent communities are navigating entirely new methods of forging relationships, building bridges, and resolving conflicts. Politically, many of them belong to the 89 percent that currently support Putin and applaud Russia's geopolitical resurgence, but they are also more pragmatic than previous generations, and perhaps more politically apathetic than given credit for.

In and of themselves, efficient communities are neither a good nor a bad thing. Effective cooperation can lead to a thriving business just as easily as it can facilitate the recent widespread Russian grassroots efforts to gather funds and military supplies for the Russia-backed insurgency in eastern Ukraine. As these modern communities strengthen, they can simultaneously serve as the Kremlin's support base and present new challenges. (It is worth noting, for instance, that many of the truck drivers that are currently organizing protests against new government taxes were once avid Putin supporters.) In a society as atomized as Russia, it is still hard to generalize about these "communities," but it is already evident that even as many of them may support the Kremlin ideologically, they are finding new and pragmatic ways to challenge the bureaucracy. That self-same bureaucracy — as I have witnessed in recent years in Moscow, where social services have been revamped and digitalized with surprising success — is evolving with them.

The clues of where Russia is headed next, whether dangerous imperial dissolution or evolution, lie not so much with the Kremlin's unpredictable actions, but on a local level with the relationship patterns inside these nascent communities. It is too early to say how they will develop, but they hold the key to the kind of country that Russia will be when it emerges from its current crisis.

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Cover image: In Saint Petersburg, Russia, an artist paints a street scene
(Credit: [Farhad Sadykov](#)/CC BY 2.0)