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SAYING GOODBYE TO THE (POST-) SOVIET UNION?

A Review Essay by Vera Michlin-Shapir

Russian Imperialism Revisited: From Disengagement to Hegemony. Domitilla Sagramoso. London: Routledge, 2020.

The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Georgia from Autocracy to Democracy. Stephen F. Jones and Neil Macfarlane eds. Buffalo: Toronto University Press, 2020.

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On the 4th of August 1991 Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of the Soviet Union, left Moscow for his summer vacation in Foros on the southern shore of Crimea. He planned to return to Moscow by 20th of August, but things did not go as planned. On 18th of August, as Gorbachev was working in his holiday residence office, a group of men demanded to see him.[1] Gorbachev quickly understood that his fears of a revanchist coup had materialised. The August Coup was underway. As British historian Archie Brown relayed it, Gorbachev's rejection of the putschists' demands condemned their actions to failure.[2] The attempted coup, however, set in motion a chain of events that led to the Union's demise. Politically it wounded Gorbachev beyond remedy. This was not least because events in Moscow, where Boris Yeltsin had taken centre stage, demonstrated that Russian society had already moved away from the Soviet oppressive model of obedience. Russian literary critic Irina Prokhorova wrote: 'I spent three unforgettable days on the barricades defending the Russian government's White House during the 1991 August coup attempt, and came away from that experience a free, no longer Soviet, person.'[3] Yeltsin came to signify this reinvigoration as he was seen personally to have prevented the coup, immortalised by his photo on a tank in front of Russia's parliament. This won him enormous popularity and support.[4] In December 1991 it was Yeltsin's plot that ended the Soviet Union.

The year 2021 saw the 30th Anniversary of the monumental events that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet the ghost of the USSR still seems to haunt Russia and the former Soviet states. Three decades later, prominent scholars of Russia and the independent states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union are grappling with the legacies of the Soviet state and its demise. Domitilla Sagramoso in her book *Russian Imperialism Revisited* (2020) re-examines the imperial legacies that shape the understanding of Russia's policies toward the former Soviet states. Her conclusions are enlightening, showing the evolution over time of

1 Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 295.
2 Ibid.
3 Irina Prokhorova (ed.), *1990: Russians Remember a Turning Point* (London: MacLehose, 2013), p. 1.
4 Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, p. 299.

neo-imperial ideas in Russian foreign and defence policies. She argues in her nuanced analysis that imperial legacies did not always shape Russia's policies towards its neighbours, and that Russia was not predestined to follow neo-imperialist policies. In the 1990s, she finds 'hardly any evidence pointing to a clear and coherent project of an informal empire-building in the ex USSR'.[5] It was 'with the advent of Vladimir Putin to the Presidency of Russia in the year 2000, designs of a more assertive Russia First policy, began to emerge', accelerating considerably after his return to a third term in office in 2012, and peaking with the annexation of Crimea in 2014.[6]

Gulnaz Sharafutdinova looks at how legacies of the Soviet collapse shaped Russian domestic politics, allowing Putin to divert Russia from a transition to democracy and remain in power for over two decades. She uses social psychological frameworks of social identity theory to explain how conditions of insecure identity allowed Putin to take away the freedoms that the demise of the Soviet state had granted to Russian citizens and to remain overall a popular leader despite such challenges as domestic political pressure from the opposition, economic downturn, and foreign sanctions.[7] This importantly challenges the popular narrative of *Homo Sovieticus* that explains the slide back from enjoying the freedoms of the 1990s to Putin's repressive authoritarianism by describing such propensity to repression as having 'been predetermined by Russia's history, culture or type of "human material".[8]

In a volume edited by Stephen F. Jones and Neil Macfarlane, the two prominent Western scholars of Georgia provide a prestigious platform for their Georgian colleagues to evaluate the Caucasian state's thirty years of independence from the Soviet Union. This is an honourable undertaking that gives a space to authentic voices to tell the story of Georgia's successes and failures over the past three decades.

5 Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 3.
6 Ibid.
7 Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 11.
8 Ibid., p. 7.

These themes of recent history, that are also personal for some of the authors of the texts, raise multiple questions, some of which stem from the subjective experience of the author of this essay. Predominantly, why three decades after the collapse of the Soviet state does its spectre still haunt the people and the lands over which it ruled? And, when, if ever, can we say goodbye to the Soviet experience by reimaging these people and territories as *not post-Soviet*, but rather *not Soviet*?

In this essay I will outline three observations, offered by these important books, on where the Soviet experience still matters three decades on, and at which points its relevance diminishes. Then I will offer my own observations on major transformations in Russia and in the former Soviet space that are not tied to its Soviet legacy, but the result of global socio-economic and financial trends. This observation highlights the benefits of moving away from the Soviet paradigm and finally parting with the Soviet Union.

On Empathy

One of the most inspiring aspects of all three books is their personal and emphatic outlook on their subject of study. The role of ideas, beliefs, and sentiments became increasingly important in social sciences and international relations through constructivist theoretical frameworks. The authors of the books employ these frameworks in ways that allow readers to engage with their research in a deep and meaningful way. Sharafutdinova makes it a central theme, stating that 'understanding Putin's Russia, with all its contradictions and paradoxes, is only possible if we capture the important nuances of the historical, social and political context shared by the majority of Russians and if we do not impose our own normative preferences and biases…'[9] Jones makes it the mission and *raison d'etre* of his volume 'to let Georgians speak for themselves'.[10] Sagramoso too in her analysis sides with social constructivists when she accounts for Russians' 'rightly or wrongly… perceived sense of

9 Ibid., p. 14.
10 Stephen F. Jones in Stephen F. Jones Neil Macfarlane (eds), *Georgia from Autocracy to Democracy* (Buffalo: Toronto University Press, 2020), p. 7.

insecurity' as a theme that informed Russian policies over the years.[11] This allows her to consider Russia's policies not as an ongoing march towards building a neo-empire on the ruins of the Soviet experiment, but as an intricate and dynamic process that evolved with time.

Writing about the former Soviet space in affective terms or, at the very least, respectfully is appropriate. The experience of the collapse of the Soviet Union was for many tragic and violent. The fact that those traumas are recent, with many of the authors having experienced them at first hand, makes empathy all the more important as these stories are at least partly told as personal histories. Consequently, the storytellers are obliged—similar to social anthropologists—to state where they stand in relation to their subject of study. Sharafutdinova does so in the preface to her book, confiding that 'Vladimir Putin is not the president of my choice. However, he is president by virtue of the choices made by people I care about'.[12] This makes the research not only more honest, but more insightful.

I too, as the author of this essay, should share my own Soviet experiences that shape my predispositions. Born to a Jewish family in the Ukrainian SSR, I emigrated to Israel with my parents just over a year before the Union collapsed in December 1991. I did not experience the collapse, but my upbringing was informed by the experiences of my family in the Soviet Union. My grandparents were grateful to the Soviet regime for its fight against German Nazism. After the war, however, they and their children, my parents, were subject to the oppressive Soviet regime and its institutional anti-Semitism. This is my personal, complex, and unpleasant Soviet memory. While I have not lived through this hardship, it informed my world view. At the same time, I am part of a different and new generation, the millennials who were raised to embrace ever greater global flexibility and the rapid development of information technologies. This experience distances me from the Soviet one.

11 Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited*, p. 8.
12 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. ix.

Both my historical and personal proximity as well as contemporary generational distance form my opinions of events that took place in Russia and the former Soviet space during the last 30 years. This makes this essay not a strictly academic or intellectual endeavour, but what British historian Tony Judt called a 'personal interpretation'.[13] Judt described intently his interpretations of post-war Europe as *opinionated*, 'a word that has acquired undeservedly pejorative connotations'.[14] My opinions make me critical of certain policies and of those who perpetrated them, and sympathetic to others with whom I feel personal or generational affinity. They make me grateful to authors who describe with empathy the stories of the people who grapple with the Soviet legacy. At the same time, they fuel my interest in researching the limits of this legacy. When and where can we finally say goodbye to Soviet and post-Soviet history and write a non-Soviet story about what is happening to the people and lands that were once part of the Soviet empire?

On Victimhood

The complex and often violent history that former Soviet citizens experienced of their not-too-distant past makes victimhood a potent and recurring theme in these books. In the post-Soviet condition, it seems, victimhood is everywhere, and everyone is a victim. Georgians' feelings of victimhood are more intuitively understandable as they were colonial subjects of the Soviet empire. Although the Soviet Union was, as Sagramoso puts it, a 'peculiar empire' that tried to erase the differences between ethnic groups and to 'blur the imperial character', and where a Georgian, Joseph Stalin (Iosif Dzhugashvili), reigned for three decades, it was an empire nonetheless.[15] Georgia's transition from the ideal of *Homo Sovieticus*, a Soviet person, to that of *Homo Democraticus*, an active citizen in a liberal democracy, was thus a process of liberation where victims and perpetrators could easily be identified. This is reflected in the writing of the contributors to Jones and Macfarlane's book.

13 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Random House, 2007), p. xiii.
14 Ibid., p. xiii.
15 Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited*, p. 11.

In *Georgia from Autocracy to Democracy*, politician David Usupashvili identifies a gap in political science education, which was a result of the perverse Soviet perception of statehood as a bourgeois institution, as a Soviet legacy that undermined Georgia's state-building in its early years of independence.[16] Another contributor, Giorgi Khelashvili, pointed out the Georgian people's difficult relationship with the term 'freedom' which was interpreted as freedom from the rule of law, as a remnant of Soviet life. Or as he puts it 'the Soviet straitjacket'.[17] Neil Macfarlane describes in his chapter how Russian policies worked to undermine Georgia's independence. Victimhood is evident in these accounts, and it is easily recognisable who was the perpetrator (the Soviet state and later Russia as its successor) and who were the victims (the Georgian people and state). The Russian people's feelings of victimhood in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union are less intuitively understandable, but are present, nonetheless. These feelings were often tied to the loss of international status that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet empire.

On Empire

Both Sagramoso and Sharafutdinova devote much attention to the importance of loss and victimhood in Russia's foreign and domestic politics. Sagramoso points out that in the 1990s Russians 'realised that the possession of nuclear weapons and the holding of a permanent seat at the UNSC were not enough to compensate for Russia's loss of global influence', and that 'proclamations by Russian officials that Russia was a great power indicated…serious doubt' about its status.[18] This disorientation as to Russia's new place in the world was aggravated by what Sagramoso calls an 'imperial syndrome in reverse'.[19] The newly independent states purposefully devised such nationalising policies that challenged Russian interests, targeting ethnic Russians and Russian speakers on their territories. These policies deepened the sense of Russian victimhood and triggered hostile Russian responses. Yet Sagramoso found that in the 1990s, for

16 David Usupashvili in Jones and Macfarlane (eds), *Georgia*, p.xviii.
17 Giorgi Khelashvili in Jones and Macfarlane (eds), *Georgia*, p. x.
18 Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited*, p. 2.
19 Ibid., p. 7.

various reasons, Russia was not trying to restore its lost status and to rebuild a looser version of its former empire, or a 'neo-empire'. Sagramoso cites the lack of a clear idea among elites of what it means to be Russian, and the weak and fragmented character of the new Russian state as further reasons for this.[20]

Sharafutdinova's book describes in detail how these real and perceived weaknesses and Russia's loss of status in the 1990s 'impacted Russia's political community, producing specific points of psychological vulnerability'.[21] Putin politicised these vulnerabilities, which Sharafutdinova terms emotional 'hot buttons', and used them as a legitimation strategy for his regime.[22] In this process the democratisation and neo-liberal economic reforms of the 1990s were reconstructed as an all-encompassing frame of Russian post-Soviet victimhood.[23] This frame, as Sharafutdinova puts it, plunges 'the entire decade into dark colours, pulling together various negative economic, social, and political aspects of life'.[24] Similarly, the Soviet experience was reimagined and reconstructed as a pleasant one with its most tragic episodes, such as Stalin's terror, gradually cleansed and rehabilitated.[25] In this process, unpleasant memories of Soviet terror and oppression were pushed aside, marginalised, and purged. This explanation challenges the framework of *Homo Sovieticus*. It reveals the contemporary Russian slide back to authoritarianism and the return to Soviet symbols and practices as a psychological and political manipulation by Putin of the Russian public, and not as an inherent Russian characteristic.

The manipulation of the hardship of the 1990s and the effort to cleanse Soviet memory are described by Sharafutdinova as two constitutive parts of the contemporary Russian sense of victimhood, which Putin used in his legitimation mechanism. But this formulation also runs the risk of replicating these exact populist binaries that Putin's regime is promoting. For instance, Sharafutdinova notes that 'dissenting voices' from the

20 Ibid., p. 15.
21 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 27.
22 Ibid., p. 27.
23 Ibid., p. 122.
24 Ibid., p. 123.
25 Ibid., p. 15.

opposition appeared in the form of 'counter-mobilisation against the dominant representation of the 1990s' but did not gain wider public appeal in Russia.[26] The problem is that oppositionist voices intent on reversing this manipulated negation upon which Putin rests his legitimacy, and in many cases represent the 1990s as a necessary evil on the way to building a new non-communist Russia. Such views ignore the adverse experience of many Russians who genuinely agree with Putin's regime narrative of the 1990s. These Russian oppositionist views also close the door to a third non-binary narrative in which the collapse of the Soviet Union was a welcome historical event, but the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s that followed it were a political and economic error. These reforms were carried out without evil intent on behalf of the reformers. But they were still erroneous because they created social vulnerabilities that destroyed Russia's chances to bring about a democratic and prosperous economic future. Such adverse outcomes of neoliberalism and the national mobilisation that followed them are hardly unique to the Russian case as they have also been observed in other societies around the world. This acknowledgment could undermine Putin's populist construction of such an artificial negation.

Sharafutdinova's argument about Putin's intentional manipulation of post-Soviet feelings of victimhood to divert Russia from its transition to democracy is in line with Sagramoso's findings about Russia's relations with neo-imperial ideas. Sagramoso explains that in the 1990s Russia was not pursuing a project to rebuild a neo-empire, not only because of its own weaknesses, but also because such a course of action was seen by Russian leaders as detrimental to Russia's own core national interests.[27] This was the prevailing attitude not only among the liberal leadership in the early 1990s, but also in the latter half of the decade under the more hard-line Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov. Russia's interest in strengthening neo-imperial structures such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) under Primakov's Prime Ministership was limited by the more lucrative economic opportunities

26 Ibid., p. 129.
27 Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited*, p. 15.

offered in the West.[28] Even on such relatively easy policy choices as a union with Belarus, Russia was unwilling to compromise its sovereignty to re-establish a union.[29]

The situation altered markedly under Putin when the 'Kremlin increasingly engaged in attempts to create a sphere of influence around its neighbouring states,' and gradually but steadily moved to neo-imperial policies.[30] These policy choices were not necessarily tied to objective national interests. According to Sagramoso, they were a consequence of Putin's personal disappointment with the West, which was accompanied by an ideological shift in the Kremlin from the mid-2000s. Since then, the Russian leadership relied on an ideology that depicted Russia at the centre of a civilisational space, one of the poles in a multipolar world, and at the heart of a 'Russian world', performing a messianic mission as a leader of the global conservative movement.[31] Russia's neo-imperial policies culminated around two seminal events in the post-Soviet space—the War in Georgia (2008) and the annexation of Crimea and war in East Ukraine (2014).

The accounts offered by Sagramoso and Sharafutdinova highlight the need to look more profoundly and intently into Putin's individual role in Russia's transformations and its policies in the region.

On Putin

Putin's presidency continues to receive extensive academic and journalistic attention. Sagramoso and Sharafutdinova raise new points about his leadership that require further consideration. Both scholars agree on the pivotal place of Putin's personal leadership in forming oppressive domestic and hostile foreign policies, and on the fact that a major shift in Russia's policies took place when Putin returned to office for a third term in 2012. They do, however, diverge on the causal dynamics that brought him to seek such strategies.

28 Ibid., p. 70–74.
29 Ibid., p. 77.
30 Ibid., p. 12.
31 Ibid., p. 16.

Sagramoso proposes that the reorientation of Russian foreign policy towards neo-imperialism, 'reflected above all its disappointment with Western rhetoric and its behaviour both globally and regionally, closer to Russia's borders'.[32] Her analysis is not apologetic. She does not imply that the West, NATO, and EU policies caused Putin to pursue a neo-imperial agenda. In fact, she clearly states that even if Putin's neo-imperialism was somehow triggered by NATO's policies, his responses in Georgia and Ukraine were illegal and disproportionate.[33] Her argument, however, still leaves the question of causality muted—why did Putin respond in such a disproportionate way to the challenges he was facing? This question is even more intriguing, given that Sagramoso finds that neither from an objective analysis, nor from the subjective understanding of Russia's own elite, did the pursuit of a neo-empire serve Russia's state goals. Which begs the question—whose goals did these neo-imperial policies really serve?

Sharafutdinova's domestic analysis is instructive in finding the answer to this pivotal question. She analyses Putin's personal leadership within the framework of a 'new psychology of leadership'.[34] This approach 'highlights that any leadership phenomenon is really a phenomenon not of one man, but of a relationship between the leader and his/her followers'.[35] Within that framework Putin's leadership was successful in four crucial ways. 1) he was seen as one of the people; 2) he was doing it for the people; and 3) he was crafting a shared sense of the people; 4) and, he was making people feel that they mattered. Then neo-imperial foreign policy was particularly important in making the people feel like they mattered in the world.[36] As Sharafutdinova puts it, 'Putin's assertive foreign policy and especially the annexation of Crimea worked to conjure a sense of pride…instilling in the Russian community a sense that "we matter"'.[37] This created a situation where 'the Russian people saw Putin

32 Ibid., p. 147.
33 Ibid., p. 321.
34 Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror*, p. 36.
35 Ibid., p. 38.
36 Ibid., p. 39.
37 Ibid., p. 46.

as the ultimate representative of the Russian national community'.[38] This was a 'calculated and psychologically grounded' strategy that benefited Putin personally, as it allowed him to 'maintain political power in the same hands'.[39]

Sharafutdinova's analysis differentiates between serving the people (or state interests) and manipulating them for the leader's own ends. The construction of a neo-empire, the constant flagging of the Soviet past, and the endless reconstruction of the trauma of the 1990s did not assist the Russian state or serve the Russian people. In fact, one of Sharafutdinova's main conclusions is that this system drives the Russian economy towards a dead end.[40] This brings one to a conclusion that Russia's new authoritarianism and its neo-imperial project served primarily Vladimir Putin, his friends, and allies. If one considers the particular ways in which this manipulation benefitted Putin, his cronies and helpers, one might discover a story far less Soviet or even post-Soviet, rather a non-Soviet story of a new type of global oppression, corruption, and disruption.

On the non-Soviet history of Russia's corruption

In February 2021, prominent Russian and international figures nominated Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny for the Nobel Peace Prize for his courage in revealing corruption and fighting for political pluralism.[41] The renowned Russian scholar Alexander Etkind explained his decision to endorse Navalny for the prize because corruption, in his words, 'is the leading threat to the global world'.[42] According to Etkind, 'the global world is founded on adherence to certain rules, both formal and informal', which Russia's 'getting rich on the back of its own people' erodes to the extent that the global world's 'mechanisms stop working.'[43] Etkind's words are an urgent call to see the moral challenge that regimes

38 Ibid., p. 40.
39 Ibid., p. 49.
40 Ibid., p. 176.
41 'Poland's Walesa nominates Kremlin critic Navalny for Nobel', *France24*, 4 February 2021.
42 Masha Gessen, 'The Evolution of Alexey Navalny's Nationalism', *The New Yorker*, 15 February 2021
43 Ibid.

such as Putin's Russia, which are based on manipulation and exploitation, pose to the liberal global order.

If we judge from the Kremlin's radical actions against Navalny, it is evident that Putin views Navalny's activities as a real threat to his regime. In August 2020 Navalny was poisoned with a chemical nerve agent by a group of Federal Security Services (FSB) agents, one of whom was duped by Navalny in an online interview to admit they had intended to kill the opposition leader.[44] When Navalny returned from his medical treatment in Germany, the Russian authorities shut down Vnukovo airport and diverted his flight to the capital's Sheremetyevo airport to prevent him from seeing his supporters.[45] Navalny was quickly jailed and his organisation, The Anti-Corruption Foundation, was designated an extremist organisation on a par with Islamic terrorists.[46] These radical actions taken by Putin's regime can be explained by an account provided by Arkady Ostrovsky, the Russia Editor of *The Economist*, in his book *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War* (2016). He writes:

> Behind these political games was not a vision of Russia's future or an ambition to restore its empire but something far more primitive: a desire for personal enrichment, comforts and power… [47]

Ostrovsky's account suggests that the Kremlin is so eager to destroy Navalny, not for fear of the young leader's electoral or popular support, but because of its primal fear that somebody could reveal to the Russian public and the world its true lifeline—the endemic and destructive nature of its officials' self-enrichment and corruption. This explanation of Putin's regime does not render Sagramoso's analysis of Russia's

44 'OPCW Issues Report on Technical Assistance Requested by Germany', *OPCW* website, 6 October 2020; 'FSB Team of Chemical Weapon Experts Implicated in Alexey Navalny Novichok Poisoning', *Bellingcat* website, 14 December 2020; "'If it Hadn't Been for the Prompt Work of the Medics": FSB Officer Inadvertently Confesses Murder Plot to Navalny', *Bellingcat* website, 21 December 2020.
45 'As it Happened: Navalny Returns to Russia', *The Moscow Times,*18 January 2021.
46 Grigory Levchenko, "'Our friendly concentration camp" Alexey Navalny confirms that he's in custody at a notorious penitentiary in Pokrov', *Meduza*, 15 March 2021.
47 Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War* (London: Polity, 2016).

neo-imperial policies or Sharafutdinova's observations on the regime's psychological manipulation any less relevant. In fact, these different dimensions work hand in hand—they mask the mass corruption and grant the regime legitimacy.

The corrupt nature of Putin's Russia adds a further global-level explanation to the Russian story. It is neither Soviet nor exclusively Russian. Russia's history is rife with economic and social injustices; however, Putin's corruption is also contemporary and global. Navalny's and other independent Russian investigations into Russian officials' corrupt practices sprawl across the globe, and frequently involve European passports and homes, real estate in European countries, luxury goods bought from international designers, and tuition fees in leading Western universities. No less important, they reveal networks of money laundering that involve the global offshore finance system and Western banks. Without the world financial system, this corruption would be anathema, and Putin's regime would be deprived of its main incentives mechanism.

The financialisation of the global economy—the backbone of the neo-liberal globalisation that has emerged in past decades—opens liberal Western regimes to serious challenges from their illiberal counterparts. It allows for money, and those who have large sums of it, to move quickly and seamlessly across borders. Ideally, such a system had been intended for fast development of businesses and innovations. In reality, however, it has facilitated a dramatic rise in tax avoidance, corruption, and injustice. It has also provided a platform for illiberal leaders to challenge the Western order. Russia's Putin, former US President Donald Trump, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and others use the global financial system to increase or hide their personal wealth. At the same time, they deride the liberal system of values of the international order and manipulate the legitimate complaints of people across the world to incite a global revolt.

This reveals systemic flaws within the Western global system of which Putin is all too aware, and these allow him to undermine the West's moral

standing. As Ostrovsky notes, 'the Kremlin believed that there was no such thing as "truth" and that strength lay only in money, that there was no such thing as values and that the only difference between Russian and Western officials was that Western officials could hide their cynicism better'.[48] From Putin's point of view, Western leaders are just as corrupt as he is, and Western countries are as unjust as the Russia that he has built in the last two decades. Their talk of rule of law and best practices, in his mind, are expressions of Russophobia that targets him and his friends for practices in which everybody else engages. He bets on what he calls 'Western double standards' and moral hypocrisy to gain absolution from the crimes his regime commits. And he might just be right.

On 14th February 2021, Valentine's Day, Navalny's supporters joined peaceful online and offline actions under the hashtag #LoveIsStrongerThanFear. Beyond the symbolism of protesting on the Western celebration of love, the practices of the protesters—lighting flashlights on their mobiles, posting photos online in red clothing, and holding flowers—were contemporary and global. London School of Economics professor Tomila Lankina observed that protesters in Russia showed once more that the oppressed *Homo Sovieticus* was no appropriate framework to understand Russia, just as Sharafutdinova had argued. Lankina described these young people as 'confident, well-travelled Russians who are aware of their rights as citizens'.[49] I empathise with these non-Soviet young Russians. I use the same social media tools as they. Like them I watched Navalny's YouTube video about Putin's palace and the vulgar corruption that it displayed.

I understand why they detest it and how it does not fit into the new world that many of my friends and I want to live in. I also see that the global nature of what they are protesting might mean that we are partners in the same struggle, and that whether they are victorious and indeed love prevails over fear, may depend not only on them.

48 Ibid.
49 Lankina Tomila, 'Citizen versus Strongman: Revival, Social Class, and Social Decay in Russia's Autocracy', *Russian Analytical Digest*, № 266, 8 April 2021.

The 'sad fact', as Navalny calls it, is that 'western law enforcement agencies treat corrupt foreign officials with kid gloves'.[50] It is indeed sad that corrupt autocratic regimes have the West's implicit approval. As Lankina writes, 'western leaders and businesses [should] reflect on…where they have fallen short. For far too often they have compromised their own integrity, for simple material gain…'. [51] There are numerous courageous journalistic and civic enterprises in Russia, and tens of thousands of ordinary Russians who are willing to risk their liberty and wellbeing to fight this contemporary form of oppression and corruption. What liberal-minded Westerners, like myself, can offer them is a recognition that their plight is not simply local; that in the global world we are all in it together.

The Russian opposition's struggle against Putin's corruption reveals today's Russia as not only a Soviet or post-Soviet story, but also as a contemporary global story. In my book *Fluid Russia—Between the National and the Global in the Post-Soviet Era* (2021) I explore the impact of neo-liberalism and globalisation on the Russian state and society. I chart a way to understand Russia's story as that of a state and a society that grapples not only with the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also with the neo-liberal disruption to institutions, routines, and identities. Putin's rise to power and his project to reaffirm a stronger identity are seen in this narrative, not as a uniquely Russian diversion from liberal democracy, but as a response to the global disruption and as part of a broader phenomenon of challenges to globalisation. Such a perspective acknowledges the importance of understanding the Soviet legacy and Russia but strives to see beyond its realm into the non-Soviet aspects that shape life inside Russia.

Importantly for me, my analysis recognises that Putin's Russia is no distant 'other' trying to undermine the Western global order from the outside but is an integral part of the global world. This alternative perspective results from my subjective position towards the topic of my

50 Alexey Navaly, 'Only action against corruption can solve the world's biggest problems', *The Guardian*, 19 August 2021.
51 Tomila Lankina, 'Putin, Russia, and the moral imperative of the West', LSE blog, 24 January 2021.

research—underscoring the importance of first-hand experience of life in the Soviet Union, and also the perspective of a different, younger generation, one that sees how Russia transformed along the lines of other contemporary global societies. To borrow Judt's words once more, such an affinity 'renders the dispassionate disengagement of the historian quite difficult to find'.[52] Yet, this approach may create new opportunities to recognise affinities and start new conversations between ordinary Russians and their Western counterparts. In a global world that faces an urgent need for systemic overhaul, these recognitions may be the best chance for decency to prevail over tyranny.

52 Judt, *Postwar*, p. xiii.