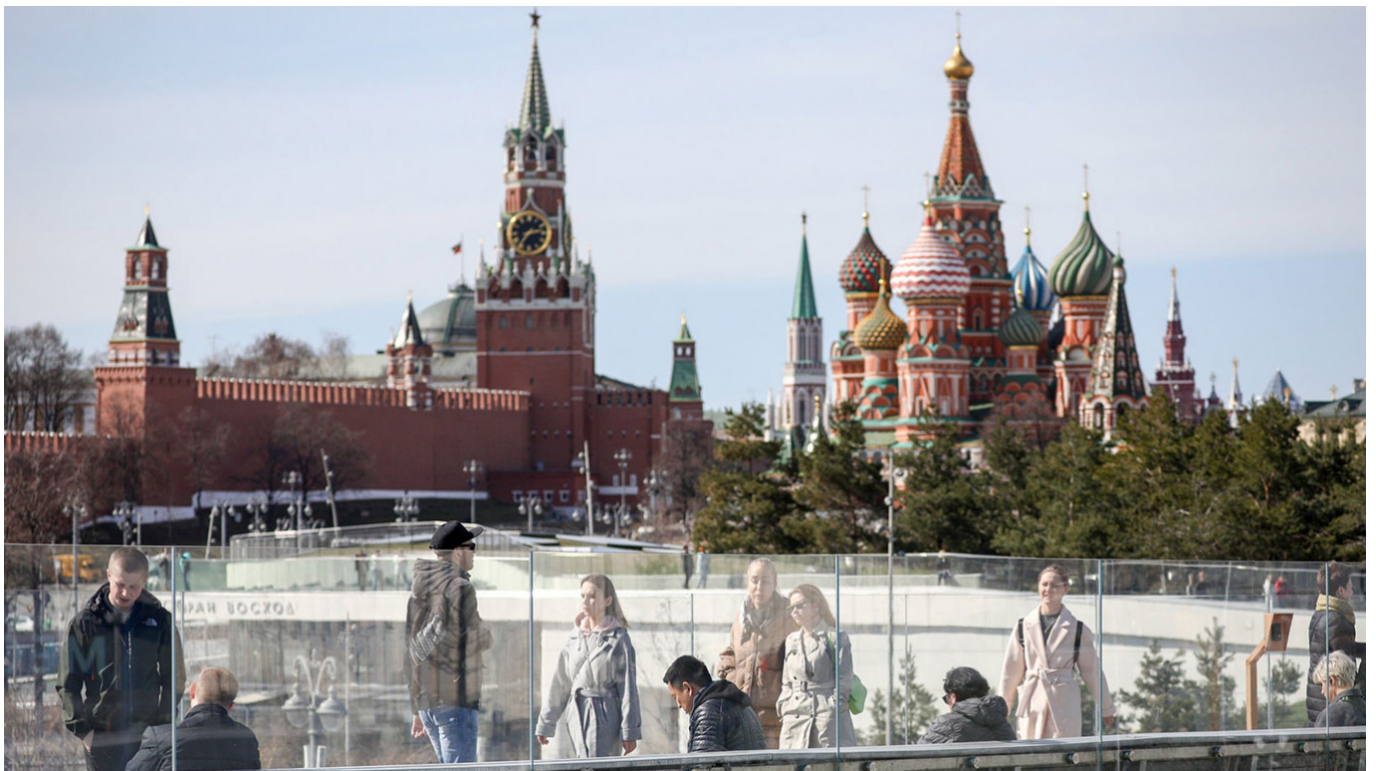


The Four Russias and Ukraine

Observations on Russia's stratified population and their attitude to war.

By [Mikhail Pirogovsky](#)

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Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency

As I watch the war in Ukraine, two images have stuck in mind. One is the Russian looters surprised at the sight of Nutella in Ukrainian houses, which they apparently perceived as a sign of outrageously high living. The other is the last day of IKEA in Moscow, stormed by desperate Russian customers. Both can tell a lot, if we recall the existence of four Russias.

“Four Russias” was created by the geographer Natalya Zubarevich in 2011. She [posited](#) the existence four distinct socio-economic blocks: the Westernized urban conglomerates; the mid-sized cities and towns, where most of the population works for the state or a big industrial corporation; the villages, so removed from everything that Vladimir Putin is about as real for them as those guys on Mt. Olympus were for Hellenic shepherds; and the “ethnic republics,” which, for the purposes of this exercise, can be rolled into the two last categories.

If you are a Russian passport holder reading this, you're one of the Westernized urbanites; if you don't have a Russian passport and are reading this, they are probably 90% of the Russians you know.

They knew the disaster for what it was right on Feb. 24, and ever since they've been protesting, emigrating, or, silenced by dependents and war censorship, sitting at home glassy-eyed, watching their world crumble.

The bottom 20% can be described through dry economic data: hand-to-mouth living, no savings at all; still using the outhouse and relying on firewood to keep warm — both 20-25% of the Russian population — really. They are often employed, the “working poor,” living below the poverty line despite having a job. \$150 is considered a decent monthly salary in the low places. Life expectancy and pension age are about the same for Russian males, so it's a close race between death and a couple years' retirement.

This is Russia beyond the big cities, in localities like Biysk or Porkhov. It's all those townlets with a grey-on-grey color scheme and roads like they've just been bombed. Born there? Your alcoholic father has quite possibly been beating up your granny for her \$150 pension, and junkies were doing salt in the back of your class in the eighth grade. Collection of scrap metal was an honorable alternative to petty theft, though the metal had to be stolen anyway. Your social circle was all sporting Adidas tracksuits, a third had done jail time. Chances are, you knew someone who killed someone. You sure knew someone who drank themselves to death (maybe it was your dad). And in lieu of the older generation to look up to, you got dames with permed hair, bloated from their cheap macaroni diet, hunched and dead-eyed before they turn 40. Somewhere, people were driving Ferraris, but you stood as much chance of becoming them as hitching a ride on the SpaceX Dragon. Not that you know what it is.

It's the young men from these low places who comprise a disproportionate percentage of the Russian invading force in Ukraine. Coupled with the simple fact that war breeds atrocity, especially a retro war like this one, is there any wonder that so many Russian soldiers, especially rank-and-file — but also some commanders from the same world — have turned to unspeakable crimes? Unspeakable to you and me, maybe; to them, it was just another Thursday — even in peacetime. The few who somehow picked up the importance of morals in spite of everything bailed out and never looked back. Or are dead. Morals are not conducive to survival in Biysk and Porkhov.

This is, of course, an explanation, not an excuse. Nothing excuses Bucha. But the why is important, especially if we don't believe that ethnicity or passport makes you sinful by default.

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And then there's the IKEA crowd — the core of the nation, about 60% by my crude reckoning. This is an important group. The people in the red brick towers are terrified of popular uprising, and everything they do always factors in broad public support, albeit through lies and coercion.

What do they believe? It's like that joke that the regime in Russia is really “mortgage

realism”: Everyone understands everything, but they’ve all got loans to pay.

Russia is a stranger to prosperity. Always has been. Even without going back to the times of Tsar Alexis, it’s been an undeniably rough ride since 1914. The living generation still has collective trauma from the early 1990s.

And then, in the last two decades, a mortgage and a cheap car became a possibility.

We simply don’t appreciate how much this means to middle Russia. The squalor of the bottom 20% remains the default quality of life that the majority of the nation expects. But instead, there came an accumulation of all the small things that, together, spell — or at least promise — a qualitative shift. A smartphone; Lego and a party at a McDonald’s for your kid’s birthday; a car to drive to your own place. This was, in fact, that feeling of stability that Putin keeps talking about.

Now Middle Russia just wants to be left alone. It clawed out a small corner of peace and comfort for itself, which took Herculean effort. Now it can’t muster the mental strength to do or care for anything else.

That’s why the Russians rushed to IKEA to grab one last bit of prosperity before the economic storm hit. That’s why the mantra “it’ll all blow over in a couple months and be back to how it was on Feb. 23” is — to me — what the core of the Russian population really thinks.

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They’re not anti-war, because they don’t have the energy for a political position, much less action — even before they were the object of the Kremlin’s hard work to stamp out any grassroots disagreement.

They’re not aggressive either. Besides, you side with what you fear — the authorities — so it doesn’t go after you. And you deny the horrors of war because accepting them would disrupt the small cozy world that took so much work to build.

This is why the popular theory that Russia is on the brink of neo-fascism is not convincing. Atomized people are easier to whip up into a totalitarian mob, but the call to arms would have to resonate with some underlying, possibly unarticulated aspirations within the population. Russians just want their IKEA back, and tickets to the latest in the Avengers movie.

Putin’s miscalculated, bloody blunder is still in an early stage. Nationwide food supplies will run out by May-June — not coincidentally when the Kremlin hopes to score a victory.

And then what? Even if there is a ceasefire — declare victory and go home — that would only be the beginning of troubles in Russia. As Lego vanishes, IKEA shows no sign of returning, and school exams are canceled for want of A4 paper...no, it won’t foment revolution. Yet. But once the war hysteria subsides, Putin’s approval ratings heading to Lukashenko-level lows.

That’s still ways off from a new president, much less a democracy, to say nothing of at least the beginning the atonement for what was — is still being — done in Ukraine. But the path back to IKEA leads through political action and a clear conscience, and the lure of Skubb and

Kleppstad is strong.

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