Opinion – The Russia-Ukraine War from the Perspective of a Data Scientist

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/04/07/opinion-the-russia-ukraine-war-from-the-perspective-of-a-data-scientist/

MAARTEN WENSINK, APR 7 2022

A data scientist not only asks which narrative, or data-generating mechanism, is compatible with the data, but also whether alternative mechanisms might have generated the data. When that is the case, the limits of the dataset are reached, and better data are needed. Through the Western self-declared prerogative of supremacy, most data that we now collect on the world are useless: they could be interpreted as action or reaction just the same. Not only does this mean we work in the dark, but also that nobody believes us.

In Western eyes, governments of non-democratic countries are less legitimate than those of democracies. Whenever the former hold views different from the West, this theory of illegitimacy comes to the fore to discredit those views. The argument is – and this is not entirely unreasonable – that lack of democracy means that the true wishes and needs of the nation are uncertain or unknown. In the past, NATO, in particular the US, have used this theory to condone warfare: non-democracies are seen as (more) legitimate targets. After all, again not entirely unreasonable, it is then not the country itself being attacked, but just its government; indeed, the population of that country could be said to be liberated. Although the sharpest edges have been taken off for now, this policy has put a multitude of countries at high alert vis-à-vis NATO and the United States. Interventionist thinking is still vividly present in Washington D.C., and a more aggressive stance may recur any day through US domestic political dynamics. After all, external enemies distract from domestic problems. Non-militarily, the West considers it its duty to spread democracy, which invariably means aiding the opposition if that opposition is pro-Western.

It is under these conditions that foreign governments generate the data that we observe and interpret when we try to understand those governments. We should be aware of this. As an epidemiologist and statistician, my job is to investigate which unobservable mechanism could have generated data that we observe. The mechanism with which the data are most compatible is often picked as a credible representation of reality. But if data could equally well have been generated from two radically opposed mechanisms, or indeed from both at the same time, the statistician has a problem.

As an example, the Russian invasion of Ukraine reignites an interest in an old issue: competing readings of (the Russia of) Vladimir Putin. One narrative is that of an aggressive, plotting Putin, set on restoring the Russian empire. The alternative is a Putin driven to exasperation by Western mismanagement and arrogance vis-à-vis Russia. How do these readings, these data-generating mechanisms compare? Perhaps surprisingly, evil Putin and driven Putin generate the same data.

The first reading is summarized as “once a Chekist [member of the secret service], always a Chekist”: what we are seeing now, and what we have been seeing all along, is the manifestation of a mindset that shows no regard for human lives, is scheming incessantly, and ruthlessly takes what can be taken. Concerns voiced by Putin about, for example, NATO missiles placed in Poland, or neo-Nazi battalions in Ukraine are nothing but a ploy to justify aggression. Vladimir Putin’s 2013 op-ed in the NY Times in which he described growing trust in Barack Obama was meant to dupe us. And the Russian president’s undemocratic dealings in domestic politics carry over one-to-one in his foreign dealings.

The alternative reading is a man who has tried to work with the West, but was told off time and again, and so drifted away. His current actions in Ukraine, while hideous, are the result of decades of disappointment, leading him to give up on his Western partners and to draw NATO a line. In this reading, his domestic suppression is the result of Western efforts to undermine what he sees as stability. And his obsession with stability comes from the Yeltsin years which, initiated with a coup and cheered as democratic by the West, were chaotic and left Russia ridiculed on the international stage. He paid attention to what we said democracy is about, one might say. All events can be explained in either of these narratives.

The second reading is now not popular in the West – by his invasion of Ukraine and the atrocities committed there by the Russian military, has not Putin confirmed that the first reading has been right all along? Yet if Putin sees a NATO Ukraine as an existential threat, which he has always said he does, then even laying waste to Ukraine can be assumed in the same reading (which does not make it right), and so does closing the ranks by propaganda. The West would do well to take this reading seriously because the rest of the world does.

Consider an investigation of the efficacy of a diabetes drug X with the following experimental design: put 20 patients on a diet, physical exercise program and drug X, and compare patients before and after this intervention. The patients see their weights reduced and their diabetes improved. Can you attribute this to the drug? The lifestyle intervention? Both? You simply don't know because lifestyle intervention and drug exposure vary together. When two variables vary together, you cannot contrast their respective effects. Epidemiologists calls this confounding. The solution: make the variables vary independently.

Through its self-declared supremacy and prerogative of war and intervention, the West has created an overwhelming quantity of bad data. Not only do bad data blur our vision, they also undermine our credibility abroad. Had we created data under a sincere, level-headed West, the world could have looked much different today. For example we could have, hopefully together with Russia, addressed the most flagrant human rights violations in Ukraine against its Russian-speaking population in a constructive manner. We could have, together with Russia, condemned the openly neo-Nazi battalions in Ukraine. We could have thanked Vladimir Putin for speaking both his mind and that of the world in his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech. In fact, had we given him the Nobel Peace Prize for that speech, not unrealistic because we gave it to Barack Obama in 2009 for saying the same thing, we could have endowed Putin with a certain prestige that would have shown that we are willing to share, and to work with those who have interests different from ours. It could have obliged him to work more constructively with us.

If we had apologized for the unintended consequences of the misguided neoliberal policies that wrecked Russia in the nineties, recommended by the West, we could have closed an age-old sore. After all, an apology – often made by the bigger person – tends to generate a win for both parties; a piece of wisdom that we try to apply in our daily lives but fail to apply in foreign policy. And so on. If, under these circumstances, Vladimir Putin had invaded Ukraine, or had curtailed free press, we would have had a credible story of evil Putin. And the rest of the world might have believed us. But we haven't and they don't. (Although they may very well share our aversion from bloodshed.)

We cannot run repeated experiments on Russia acting under different circumstances and apply statistics. Still we apply regularly the principle of non-confounding in our professional behavior: If we have difficulty with a colleague, we first make sure that there is nothing in our own behavior that maintains the problem. First, to make sure that this is indeed not the case, second to make sure that we are able to convince others that we have done what we could. To our primitive minds, this often seems like giving in at first, but there are ways of negotiating agreements without giving in, and once you get the hang of it you just have fewer problems in life. It only takes a measure of professional development. In a democracy, it requires leadership as well.

With its free press, the West is collecting an ever-growing wealth of data on the world. Yet these data are compatible with so many narratives that we remain blind and unbelieved. This is a big problem which will grow only bigger. This may seem like an odd claim because events in Ukraine are so clearly wrong. Yet an interesting place to be now is India, a relatively neutral observer at this time: Unlike China, there is free press that does not follow the Russian state propaganda, yet the whole spectrum of opinions about the Ukraine situation is amply covered among the population. We would do well to take notice, not least because some acknowledgement that we finally got the point may just be

the change that would allow Putin to stop the war.

About the author:

Maarten Wensink is a statistician and medical doctor who specializes in real-world data. He works as an epidemiologist in the private sector and formerly was an associate professor in epidemiology at the University of Southern Denmark.