



# UnSSEESing

THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE FROM THE UCL SCHOOL OF  
SLAVONIC AND EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES



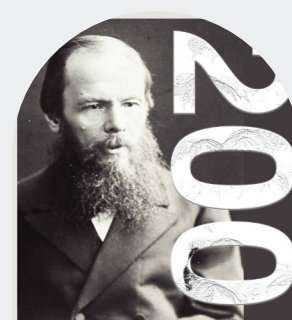
## The first post-pandemic book launch

Dr Ben Noble, recounts the story of Alexei Navalny



## Foreign policy perspectives

Dr Pete Duncan on Afghanistan, Russia, China and the West



## A bicentennial occasion

Dr Sarah J. Young on Dostoevsky: Telling Tales



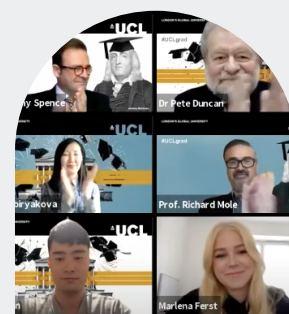
## SSEES Alumni Prize

Prize for a Final Year Undergraduate Student with outstanding dissertation



## Quizzes

Report on the SSEES Alumni online quiz



## Virtual graduation

SSEES Virtual graduation took place in September 2021

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# WELCOME



Welcome to the 2021 SSEES Alumni magazine, the second to be released during the global pandemic. We hope that you and your loved ones are well, but please know that our thoughts are with those of you who have suffered loss during this time.

In this issue we mark the gradual return to some sense of normality at Taviton Street after a prolonged period, with the first in-person event – the launch of *Navalny: Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future?* There are other highlights, notably Dostoevsky's bicentenary and the latest Alumni news.

As SSEES gradually starts to come back to life, we would also like to ask Alumni to share any experiences and/or personal insights that they may care to contribute for forthcoming newsletters.

This may include, for example, experiences related to Covid-19, in addition to the themes covered in this exciting edition of *UnSSEESing*, such as our new feature on “Foreign policy perspectives”.

Looking ahead, if all goes to plan, we hope we will be able to get together for a very special Eastern European Food and Drink event in the Masaryk Room in the Spring Term. As soon as we are able, we will email you a save-the-date invitation so please look out for it in your Inbox!

We hope you enjoy reading this issue.

With best regards,

*Katya Kocourek, Angela Garrett, Pete Duncan, Hugo Allen, Irina Maryniak, with invaluable help and support from Patricia Gabalova*

# BOOK LAUNCH

In the first in-person book launch held at the School since the start of Covid-19, Dr Ben Noble, Associate Professor in Russian Politics, recounts the story of Alexei Navalny

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Who is Alexei Navalny? His name will be familiar to many, particularly since his poisoning in August 2020, treatment and recovery in Germany, and return to Russia in January 2021. Media coverage of Navalny at those points was widespread – but simplistic. He was often painted as the unblemished hero confronting Vladimir Putin and corrupt elites in Russia. The narrative was Manichaeian: good versus evil; democrat versus dictator; heroic knight versus the dragon.

That made for a simple, seductive story, but it often ran into trouble. Take the debacle with Amnesty International (AI). Initially labelled a ‘prisoner of conscience’ after his detention at border control in Moscow on 17 January 2021, this was revoked by the organisation in February, pointing to statements Navalny had made in the past – and for which he has not apologised – which, AI said, ‘amounted to advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, violence or hostility’.

But the ‘prisoner of conscience’ designation was returned to Navalny in May. AI said that it had made the wrong decision in February – and that its move had had a negative impact on Navalny and his movement. These U-turns caused understandable confusion – and highlighted Navalny’s complexity and controversies.



There was clearly a need for material to help make sense of this key figure in the Russian opposition to those outside of Russia. I was repeatedly asked to recommend the best English-language book on Navalny. But the task wasn’t evaluating different books: there wasn’t even one book. Dr Seán Hanley – Associate Professor in Comparative Central and East European Politics – suggested that, if a book hasn’t been written, then I should write it myself.

I responded by throwing my arms up into the air: ‘I don’t have enough time to do what I’m already supposed to be doing, never mind writing a book!’

But Seán’s idea stuck with me. So, at the end of January, I reached out to Jan Matti Dollbaum (University of Bremen) and Morvan Lallouet (University of Kent) – two scholars working on Navalny – to check whether they could think of any existing book. And to suggest that, if they couldn’t, we might write one together. In what now seems like a blur, we got an agent, got contracts for editions of the book in different languages, and set about writing. We had a first draft completed by the end of April.

In the book, we divide Navalny’s story so far into three strands: as anti-corruption activist; politician; and protester. We show how his policy positions and activities have changed over time – and how the Kremlin has adapted in response. As well as discussing Navalny the man, we also focus on the team and movement he has built, including

the organisations he created – such as the Anti-Corruption Foundation (established in 2012) – which have now been labelled ‘extremist’ and dissolved.

We were finishing the first draft of the book when it became clear the drastic steps the Russian authorities were willing to go to crush Navalny and his movement. Our book hopefully puts these developments into context – and makes clear why the Kremlin is so afraid of the challenge presented by him.

**Dr Ben Noble**

is Associate Professor in  
Russian Politics at  
UCL SSEES



Use discount code **NAVALNY25** for 25% off when ordering the book directly from [Hurst](#)

Use discount code **ADISTA5** for 30% off when ordering the book directly from [Oxford University Press](#)

[Click here to watch the event recording.](#)



Navalny: Putin’s Nemesis, Russia’s Future?, published in English by Hurst and Oxford University Press, was launched at UCL SSEES on 20 September 2021

# PERSPECTIVES ON FOREIGN POLICY...

Afghanistan, Russia, China and the West  
Dr Pete Duncan, Honorary Associate Professor

Russia for many years regarded the Taliban as terrorists. Yet when Kabul fell in August, the Russian Embassy remained there, alongside the Chinese, while Western diplomats raced for the exit. The Russian Ambassador claimed that Kabul was more secure under the Taliban than it had been under the previous NATO-backed government. RT, the foreign-language propaganda TV channel, denounced those who had worked for that government as 'collaborators' who should not be allowed to leave the country – even while the Taliban themselves were letting thousands of Afghans leave from the airport. How had such a change come about? Back in 2000 Putin had denounced Islamist international

terrorism, rightly singling out Osama bin Laden as the central figure. How had such a change come about? Back in 2000 Putin had denounced Islamist international terrorism, rightly singling out Osama bin Laden as the central figure. After the attacks of 11 September 2001, Putin joined George W. Bush in the 'global war on terror'. But several years ago Russia began to argue for the Kabul government to engage in negotiations with the Taliban. This was not only because Putin now feared the rise of the Daesh wing in the region, the so-called Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). It was also because Russia sensed which way the wind was blowing, with the NATO



withdrawal (originally promised for 2014) and wanted to increase its influence in Afghanistan.

China and Russia have not always seen eye-to-eye on Afghanistan. In 2001, Beijing was angry that Putin agreed to the creation of US bases in Central Asia to help defeat the Taliban. Later, when Hamid Karzai was installed as president, Moscow was furious that the contract for developing a major copper deposit was given to a Chinese company and not to the Russian bidder. This blow was worse, because the deposit had originally been surveyed by the Soviet Union during its occupation of the country.

For now, though, relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated to the extent that Russia is willing to reverse its position completely in relation to the Taliban, even though it still fears the possibility of their influence in Central Asia and Chechnia. At the same time Russia will seek to join in what will be a struggle for rights to mine the valuable rare earths waiting in Afghanistan. China, however, with its greater financial muscle, appears ready to replace Pakistan as the major supporter of the Taliban, on the condition that they give no support to the Uighurs.

Why did Joe Biden feel bound by an agreement between Donald Trump and the Taliban to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan in 2021? Trump had shown his contempt for democracy, claiming that he had won the 2020 election, pressuring officials in marginal states to find

additional votes for him, urging Mike Pence not to proceed with the constitutional process in January 2021 and finally sending a crowd of thugs to the Capitol to stop Congress from confirming Biden in power. And the Taliban was recognized by the United States as a terrorist organization. Biden seems to have believed that despite the ignoble origins of the agreement, it was time to end the 'forever wars'.

Undoubtedly, the war in Afghanistan had many bad features: the creation of the Guantanamo prison, deliberately outside US legal protection, where innocent people were tortured and killed; the introduction of 'counter-terrorism' legislation in many countries, restricting human rights; the cover given to Putin in repression of the Chechens; the widespread corruption in Afghanistan, fuelled by American dollars; above all, the deaths of thousands of NATO soldiers and literally countless Afghan soldiers and civilians, many killed by air strikes and drones.

But at the same time real advances were made, in education, in the development of free media, and above all in the advancement of women's rights. At least two SSEES alumni whom I taught were involved in promoting this process on the ground, in Helmand and Kabul. All this progress has been reversed by the withdrawal of America, Britain and our allies, and is culminating in the Taliban's revengeful murders of those who worked for democracy and emancipation.

The fall of the Kabul government and the terrible scenes at the airport, with thousands of Afghans who had worked with Western governments and organizations being abandoned to the Taliban, may have pushed back in our memories events from earlier this year in Europe. One hundred thousand Russian troops were mobilized around Ukraine, supposedly in response to a NATO exercise. I think that the main reason behind Putin's action was to intimidate Ukraine, in particular to persuade President Volodymyr Zelens'kyi to drop the aim of closer links with NATO and the EU. At the same time Moscow wanted to present the new President Joe Biden with a show of strength. In May a Ryanair jet, flying between two EU countries, was forced down over Belarus, on the orders of the dictator Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who now depends on Putin. The sole reason for this state terrorist air piracy was to capture and break a Belarusian democratic activist, Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend.

Biden's abandonment of Afghanistan was made worse by the decision of Britain and other countries not to plan for remaining after the American withdrawal. The defeat will not only harm our security by opening a friendly home for the conduct of international terrorist operations. It will raise the morale of Islamist groups worldwide. But still more serious is the signal it sends to Moscow and Beijing about how robust the United States will be in upholding the security of its friends around the globe. Putin may risk further adventures in Ukraine or elsewhere in Europe.

China may see this as a good time to incorporate Taiwan.

The formation of AUKUS by Australia, the UK and the United States does show a greater willingness to face up to China, but the manner of its emergence has alienated key NATO allies, especially France. I think that SSEES alumni around the world, with their traditional belief in public service and democracy, have a role to play in strengthening the internationalist commitments of democratic states, and avoid the turn to nationalist isolationism which currently is threatened.

**Dr Pete Duncan**  
is Honorary Associate  
Professor at UCL SSEES





# 2021 MARKS AN IMPORTANT BICENTENNIAL OCCASION ...

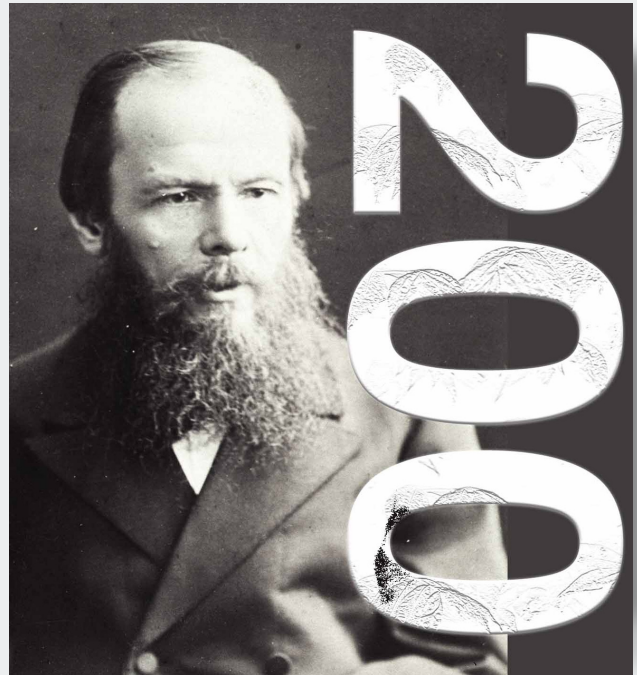
Dostoevsky: Telling Tales  
Sarah J. Young, Associate Professor of Russian

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As I think about Dostoevsky in his bicentenary year, I sometimes wonder why I remain so attracted to a novelist whose portrayal of human behaviour at the extremes can be hard to take at times. Part of the answer to that is that amidst the unremitting gloom of caricature, he is actually a very funny writer. But it's also to do with the seemingly limitless scope of his work, which is infinitely amenable to new insights and interpretations, and which always has something to say in relation to the world we're living in.

Dostoevsky is still viewed first and foremost as a novelist of ideas, but for me the enduring fascination of his works lies not directly in his famous 'accursed questions' of life and death, faith and doubt, good and evil, but in the structure of his novels, and how they work technically. Typically for Dostoevsky, who took nothing for granted, and the transparency of the story-telling process least of all, that involves its own set of 'accursed questions', which are primarily to do with writing itself and its ability not simply to articulate ideas, but to create worlds that pose their own philosophical problems about that writing – which then themselves become part of the story.

From the autobiographical novelist-narrator of *The Insulted and Injured*, to the *Underground Man* who can literally never stop confessing his misdeeds,



and the seemingly endless stream of minor characters in *The Idiot* trying to displace the narrator with their own interpretations of the main events and relationships, the impulse to tell stories in Dostoevsky's fictional world becomes a mark of the human.

There are three moments, all related, and all concerned in one way or another with the question of judgement, that bring the full implications of story-telling, and Dostoevsky's unique insight into it, to the forefront. The first is Prince Myshkin's statement in *The Idiot*, 'Only God knows what is concealed in those weak and drunken hearts'. This may be a primarily ethical question about who among human

beings has the right to judge, but it's uttered in the context of the four stories Myshkin tells Rogozhin in response to a question about whether he believes in God. Its implications for how we understand intentions and motivations resounds not only throughout the novel's multiple story-telling events, but in Dostoevsky's work more generally.

The second is a feature of the fictionalized version of Dostoevsky's incarceration in the hard labour camp in Omsk, *Notes from the House of the Dead*. One of the most fundamental questions facing Dostoevsky's avatar, Gorianchikov, is the gulf that separates him from the peasant convicts around him, and the fact that he has no access to their thoughts – something that for me endures to the end of the novel, however much he claims he has gained some understanding.

How, then, is the great psychologist supposed to tell his story? Focusing on the crowd rather than the individual, his answer is frequently to turn to speculative and imaginative constructions that may ultimately tell us more about the narrator than his subjects. It's a solution that not only raises ethical questions about the treatment of those subjects (not least the extent to which they must therefore remain objects, deprived of agency), but also undercuts any sense of reliability the narrative may have.

The third incident is the dramatic trial scene in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which the defence lawyer characterizes entirely in terms of believability. Both prosecution and defence are advancing their own

narratives – which are even described as 'novels' – about what happened to Dmitry Karamazov on the fatal night, and the fundamental question is not which one is true, but precisely which one will be more believed. In novels that abound in gossip, where what we know – or think we know – is as liable to be the product of rumour as anything else (think about the number of stories told about Nastasya Filippovna in *The Idiot*, or Stavrogin in *Demons*, who both appear only very briefly in the present time of their respective novels and whose images are largely constructed out of others' words about them), the question of truth, of what we can really know about a story in a fictional context, becomes very nebulous indeed.

So my work on Dostoevsky constantly comes back to deceptively simple questions such as: who is telling the story? How do they know it? or, where does it come from? what do they do when, as is often the case, they don't know? Which version(s) are we therefore getting (and which, by extension, are hidden from us – and why)?

In novels where lies and truth are often difficult to distinguish, the answers to such questions often bring me to unexpected conclusions, from identifying the child's gaze as the key to the fantastic in Dostoevsky's works, to elucidating forms of witnessing that are paradoxically enhanced, rather than subverted, by blindness and deafness. And in a climate where fake news promoted by an algorithm is as likely to be believed as a real story, and a politically polarized media values engagement, clicks and,

advertising revenue above all else, reading Dostoevsky in this way seems to me to make him as relevant as ever.



**Dr Sarah J. Young**  
is Associate Professor  
of Russian at UCL SSEES



## UPCOMING EVENT

A special roundtable co-organised by the SSEES Russian Studies seminar series and the University of Leeds for “Dostoevsky 200” will be held on 29 November 2021 at 5.15pm GMT via ZOOM. For further details and to sign up, [please click here.](#)

From the nationalist arguments of his late journalism, where he championed Russian Orthodoxy and ‘God-bearing’ peasantry, to his explorations of the possibility and dangers of radical social transformation, as well as insights into populist tactics in his fictional depictions of revolutionaries, Dostoevsky’s profound concern with the state of contemporary Russia and what it could give to the wider world continues to resonate today. As part of a series of events to mark Dostoevsky’s bicentenary, this roundtable brings together a panel of experts to discuss literature’s contribution to nationalist and populist trends, Russia’s relationship to its cultural heritage, and the relevance for global audiences of Dostoevsky’s vision of Russia.

### **SPEAKERS:**

**Ani Kokobobo** is Associate Professor of Russian literature and chair of Slavic and Eurasian Languages and Literatures at the University of Kansas.

**Lynn Ellen Patyk** is Associate Professor of Russian at Dartmouth College.

**Vlad Strukov** (PhD) is a London-based multidisciplinary researcher, curator, and cultural practitioner, specializing in art, media, and technology cross-overs.

**Vera Tolz** is Sir William Mather Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Manchester, UK.

**Jennifer Wilson** is a contributing essayist at The New York Times Book Review and a contributing writer at The Nation.

The session will be chaired by **Sarah Hudspith** (Associate Professor, University of Leeds) and **Sarah J. Young** (Associate Professor, UCL SSEES)

# SSEES ALUMNI NEWS



## SSEES ALUMNI PRIZE

SSEES Alumni Prize for a Final Year Undergraduate Student with outstanding dissertation (£50)

We are delighted to announce the inauguration of the SSEES Alumni Prize. The prize money will be donated out of funds raised through the events organised by the Alumni committee, or from alumni donations, and will be awarded according to the following rules:

1. The SSEES Alumni prize is awarded on the recommendation of the Director of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies.
2. The prize is awarded to a final-year undergraduate student who has received a first-class mark for their dissertation in any one of the SSEES undergraduate programmes and who has an overall mark average in First Class.
3. In addition, the nominated undergraduate should have no marks below 60 across the final two years (for study abroad students, this means Years 2 and 4).
4. The total value of the prize is £50.
5. The recommendations will be made by the relevant Examination Boards. Final decisions will be made by the Director with the Chair of the Board of Examiners.
6. The Award shall be announced in the summer.
7. Awards are subject to the provision of the General Regulations.

The SSEES Alumni Prize was awarded this year for the first time. The committee is delighted to announce that the recipient was **Levon Ter-Petrosyan**, BA Economics & Business with East European Studies. We wish him well as he embarks on his future studying for a Masters degree in Management at the London Business School. We hope to welcome him back to UCL SSEES for one of our events in the future.

*The committee would like to thank Barbora Posluch, Personal Assistant to the Director, for all her help in arranging this and Professor Diane P. Koenker, the Director, for her support.*

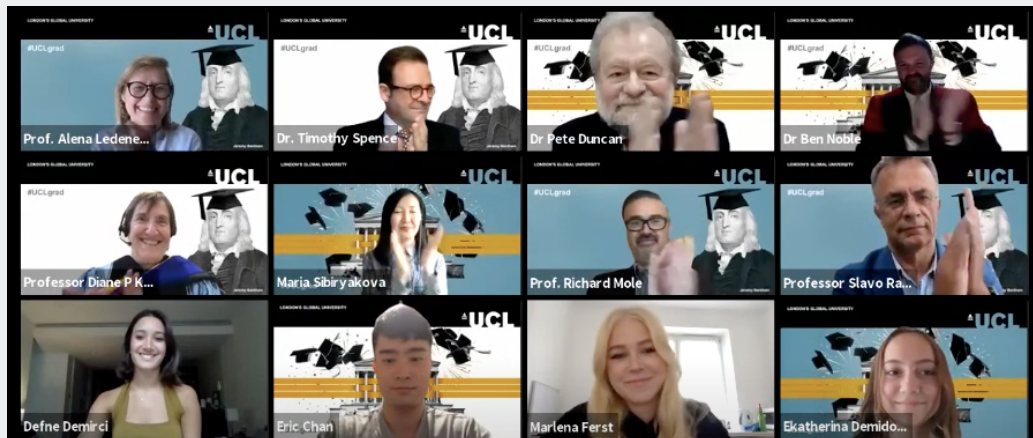
## SSEES ALUMNI QUIZ REPORT



SSEES Alumni organized a quiz for its members on 8 July 2021. The Quizmaster was Michael Wozniak, Academic Administration Manager. He devised fiendishly difficult questions, which the entrants were well prepared to answer. The evening was held together technically by Patricia Gabalova, Events and Communications Officer.

The result was breathtakingly close. In first place came the Senators (named after Senate House), with 49 points; second were Vostok, with 48 points; and third were Lukashenka's Babes, with 44 points.

## VIRTUAL GRADUATION



Another virtual graduation was much enjoyed by SSEES Alumni in September 2021. On this occasion, it was very exciting for the graduands to be seen on the camera as their names were being called out. Many congratulations to all the new SSEES Alumni!

[Watch the SSEES Virtual Graduation online](#)

[Further details about UCL Virtual Graduations 2021](#)

Looking ahead, in 2022, we all very much hope that graduations will be convened once again in person.



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Edited by Katya Kocourek / Designed by Patricia Gabalova

Contact us  
SSEES Alumni Association:  
For enquiries please contact: [Patricia Gabalova](#)

SSEES Alumni Association Committee Members:  
Angela Garrett, Peter Duncan, Hugo Allen,  
Katya Kocourek and Irena Maryniak

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UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies  
16 Taviton Street  
London  
WC1H 0BW