

RUSSIA'S "CONSERVATIVE MODERNIZATION": HOW TO SILENCE THE VOICES OF THE OPPOSITION

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Abstract

Under Dmitry Medvedev's and now Vladimir Putin's presidency, modernization was/is presented as a national imperative for the Russian government. It became a political slogan and a means by which to restore Russia's power internally and externally. This campaign serves to push the agendas of some of Russia's ruling elite within the larger ruling camp. This article tries to answer the following question: How do Russian elites understand modernization, both historically and within the current context? It concludes that Russian "political technologists", who have been in power in the last 15 years, have become masters in the art of silencing the voices of those who take a critical view of the government's policies.

Keywords

Russia, Modernization, Putin, Medvedev, Conservatism

How to cite this article

Rousseau, Richard (2015). *"Russia's «conservative modernization»: how to silence the voices of the opposition"*. JANUS.NET e-journal of International Relations, Vol. 6, N.º 2, November 2015-April 2016. Consulted [online] on date of last visit, observare.ual.pt/janus.net/en_vol6_n2_art03

Article received on 25 June 2015 and accepted for publication on 29 September 2015



RUSSIA'S "CONSERVATIVE MODERNIZATION": HOW TO SILENCE THE VOICES OF THE OPPOSITION

Richard Rousseau

In 2011, under his "Go Russia!" *motto*, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012) called on citizens to take a fresh look at their country's history and direction. He was intent on introducing a debate on the need for economic modernization, which has been a recurrent theme throughout Russia's history, dating back to the time of Peter the Great.

Modernization is now being presented as a national imperative under the Putin administration, repackaged as a political slogan and embossed in the usual layers of rhetoric and nationalism. This campaign serves to push the agendas of some of Russia's ruling elite within the larger ruling camp. But how do Russian elites understand modernization, both historically and within the current context?

Russia is too often misunderstood by Western experts and politicians, as there appears to be no middle ground. Many either take a very negative and somber view of the country¹, or they claim that Russia is so unique and exotic that it is in a category of its own, not comparable to other states².

Both these views of Russia are misleading. The first paints a very gloomy picture of Russia's social and economic conditions, and uses historical precedent to argue that it has always been perceived as a dangerous country. It cannot be denied that there have been, and continue to be, many disturbing aspects to Russia's development, but this fascination with Russia's dark side underpins the perceptions of Russia most commonly heard in the West, which derives from an overly selective recalling of historical events. The second understanding, that Russia is an exotic, almost oriental place, full of paradoxes, mystery and intrigue, implies that it cannot be so easily understood by applying generic social science paradigms. The argument is that as Russia is culturally unique, it does not come close to adopting normal development paths, particularly

¹ See Blank, Stephen (2015). Putin Celebrates Stalinism. Again. Atlantic Council, 27 May. Available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/putin-celebrates-stalinism-again>; Pipes, R. (1991). The Russian Revolution. Vintage, 1st Ed; Brzezinski, Zbigniew (1990). Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century. Collier Books; Nolte, E., and Furret, F. (2004). Fascism and Communism. University of Nebraska Press, 1st Ed.

² See Getty, J. H., and Naumov, Oleg (1999). The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939. Yale University Press; Malia, M. (1995). The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991. Free Press; Applebaum, A. (2003). Gulag: A History. Doubleday; Raeff, M. (1994). Political Ideas and Institutions in Imperial Russia. Boulder, CO: Westview.



when compared to those of Western countries. Taking this view is, in effect, a means of avoiding making any definite statement about what Russia is.

Russia is different in many ways, not only from the other states that constituted the former Soviet Union but from countries of comparable size and population. It also stands apart because of the geopolitical role it plays in both Europe and Eurasia, and its strategic significance as the world's second largest nuclear power. It wields important political clout due to its status as a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council. Above all, Russia is unique because it perceives itself to be different – but all countries perceive themselves to be unique in some way, and wants to remain different.

The collapse and rebuilding of Russia's state structures, political institutions and economic system after the demise of the USSR in 1991 created enormous uncertainty for Russia and affected the way Russians defined themselves as a nation. For instance, although today's Russian Federation is the direct successor of a thousand years of statehood, the political forms and boundaries of the contemporary state differ from any that Russia has known. Like the Soviet Union, the Russian Republic was also formally considered a federation and had internal ethnic-national subdivisions. But in contrast to the larger USSR, only some of its constituent members are ethnic national territories. Why? Because most of the republics in the Russian Federation are pure administrative subdivisions populated by Russians. Under the Soviet system, Russia's internal ethnic national territories were classified by size and status into autonomous republics and autonomous provinces and by national districts. Today, all the former autonomous republics are simply termed republics. In many republics, the indigenous ethnic group comprises a minority of the population. Since 1991 the names and status of some of the constituent units in Russia have changed³.

The modernization imperative took root in the so-called third cycle of development, or post-communist cycle, which began in 1991, the first two cycles being the period from the Revolution of 1905 to the February Revolution of 1917 and the Communist period (1917-1991)⁴. In September 2009, Dmitry Medvedev wrote on the President of Russia's website that "previous attempts to modernize Russia – those initiated by Peter the Great and the Soviet Union – had partially failed and had come at a high social cost to Russia"⁵.

Looking back at the transformation of Russia since 1991, this period has been characterized by alternating pushes for reform and stability and has contributed in large part to the creation of a hybrid system combining elements of superficial Westernization with the remnants of a Soviet iron fist policy. The overall results appear to be an elite-led modernization of the economic system and society that has become fused with a greater degree of authoritarianism in the political domain⁶.

Government elites have been transformed into a new kind of ruling class – similar to royalty – which today controls the many layers of state and para-state bureaucracies, military and law enforcement institutions. This class is linked with Russian corporations through the use of administrative resources and in its rent-seeking behavior. For

³ See Sakwa, R. (2008). *Russian Politics and Society*. London and New York, Routledge, Fourth Edition.

⁴ See Figes, Orlando (2014). *Revolutionary Russia, 1891–1991*, Metropolitan Books.

⁵ Medvedev, Dmitry (2009). *Go Russia!* President of Russia Official Web-Site, September 10. Available at: <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/298>

⁶ Mezrich, B. (2015). *Once Upon a Time in Russia: The Rise of the Oligarchs. A True Story of Ambition, Wealth, Betrayal, and Murder*. Atria Books.



instance, most of the firms run by former KGB colleagues of Putin – whether Russian Railroad President Vladimir Yakunin or Igor Sechin, the Executive Chairman of Rosneft – and hit hard by the EU and U.S. sanctions provoked by the war in Eastern Ukraine have received bailouts from the Russian government⁷. Such vested interests synergize and determine Russia's future.

The post-Soviet ruling class, particularly the group known as the "siloviki" (those 'men in uniform' reared in intelligence and law enforcement agencies and the Soviet Army), reached the helm of power under Putin's first presidency (2000-2008) and have effectively alienated themselves from the Russian social fabric⁸. The gap between the ruling class and ordinary Russians is similar in degree to that found in the poorest third world countries. Because of this widening gap between the rulers and those being ruled Russian sociologists have diagnosed a deepening social-economic crisis in contemporary Russia.

The Putinist, semi-authoritarian "new integration project for Eurasia"⁹, which purportedly aims to provide the possibility of a leap of civilization into the 21st century, has actually become a barrier to social change¹⁰. Putin's "conservative modernization", which has predominated in official discourse in Russia since 2011, has, in fact, sanctioned the social protection and prolongation of the status quo. It has come to symbolize merely the good intentions and esteem of the powers that be¹¹. This style of modernization has little in common with the ideas of Western European modernizers of the 20th century¹². For some Russian observers, it compares with that of the "obstructionists" and "reactionaries" of the epoch of "stagnation" under *Leonid Brezhnev's leadership*¹³.

Conservative Modernization

Liberalism in the West has developed over a long time as private property, individual freedoms and rationalist thinking developed, whereas in Russia all three has been absent or were severely limited. The main problem in Russia was that the subject of liberalism, homo economicus, was largely absent, and therefore liberalism found its main support among the urban liberal intelligentsia¹⁴.

⁷ Miller, Chris (2015). Russia's Economy: Sanctions, Bailouts, and Austerity. [Foreign Policy Research Institute](http://www.fpri.org/articles/2015/02/russias-economy-sanctions-bailouts-and-austerity), February. Available at: <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2015/02/russias-economy-sanctions-bailouts-and-austerity>

⁸ See Hoffman, D. E. (2011). The Oligarchs: Wealth And Power In The New Russia. Public Affairs, Revised Edition; Illarionov, Andrey (2009). The Siloviki in Charge. *Journal of Democracy*, 20 (2), pp. 69-72.

⁹ Putin, Vladimir (2013). A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making. *Izvestia*, October 3. (Reproduced on the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union website). Available at: <http://www.russianmission.eu/en#sthash.H1eXjC3e.dpuf>

¹⁰ Inozemtsev, Vladislav (2010). Russie, Une Société Libre Sous Contrôle Autoritaire. (Russia – A Free Society Under Authoritarian Control). *Le Monde Diplomatique*, No.10, p. 4-5.

¹¹ See Inozemtsev, Vladislav (2010). Istoriya i Uroki Rossiyskikh Modernizatsiy. (The History and Lessons of Russian Modernisations). *Rossiia i Sovremenniy Mir*, No 2 [67], April-June, p. 6-11; *Trenin, Dmitri (2010). Russia's Conservative Modernization: A Mission Impossible? SAIS Review, Volume 30, Number 1, Winter-Spring, pp. 27-37.*

¹² Von Laue, Theodore H. (1987). The World Revolution of Westernization. The Twentieth Century in Global Perspective. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

¹³ Inozemtsev, Vladislav (2010). O Tsennostyakh I Normakh. (On values and Norms). *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 5 March, p. 3.

¹⁴ Raeff, M. (1994). Political Ideas and... Op. Cit., p. 56.



In the West liberalism (including private property, individualism and the defense of the individual and property rights in law) has come before democracy, but in Russia it was the democratic revolution itself in 1987-1991 that created the bases of liberalism. This it tried to do by diffusing the economic power that is associated with private property to establish the basis for individual rights; but at the same time asserted the need for the concentration of political power, a post-communist Leviathan, in the form of presidential power¹⁵.

Economic liberalism but not necessarily fully fledged democracy was on the agenda. The deconcentration of economic power, moreover, succeeded in establishing a class of "new Russians" and oligarchs, but appeared to do little for the mass of the population, a large proportion of whom lost the social guarantees of the Soviet period and gained very little in return. Liberalism remained far from hegemonic, challenged by the counter-ideology of statism, and neither was it universal, limited to certain enclaves of globalism in Russia, Moscow, St Petersburg and some other cities. Nevertheless, despite the loss of territory and the collapse of the comforting certainties of an all-embracing ideology it would be false to argue that liberalism failed to take root in Russia.

At the heart of the liberal democratic revolution is the attempt to establish a market economy and representative government. But how? While the liberal reformers of the 1990s paid lip service to representative government, faced with what to them appeared intractable opposition from the conservatives in parliament many argued in favor of an "iron hand", the strong presidency and state acting as a type of enlightened despotism pushing through the reforms but preserving the main post-Soviet political institutions.

Boris Yeltsin, the first post-Soviet president, appeared to succeed where Mikhail Gorbachev failed in finding a mid-path between representative government and outright coercion, a type of virtual representation of political and social interests described by the various labels of delegative, illiberal or regime democracy. The collapse of communist power and the weak development of a democratic counter-system allowed bureaucratic and elite structures to establish a relatively high degree of autonomy.

This was most evident in the government itself in the 1990s, established as a sort of technocratic high command of the economic transition. In the regions, too, the control functions once fulfilled by the Communist Party were only weakly replaced by the system of federal representatives at the regional or federal district level. While social change and economic transformation were perhaps prerequisites for a liberal order, political development and democratization require more.

In reaction to the attempt to achieve a liberal modernization without liberals a type of post-communist Russian conservatism emerged. Conservatism in Russia has much deeper roots and philosophical traditions to draw on than liberalism; but at the turn of the century and at the onset of Putin's third presidential term (2011-2012) attempts were made to combine the two in a distinctive Russian ideology of conservative modernization.

¹⁵ Gill, G. and Merckwick, R., D. (2000). *Russia's Stillborn Democracy? From Gorbachev to Yeltsin*. Oxford University Press, pp. 127-150.



Perhaps the most potent source of conservative modernization, however, was the patriotic view of the need for a strong state combined with individual rights and a constitutional system¹⁶. Thus, in Russia a unique synthesis of economic liberalism, modernization and political conservatism took shape and assumed political form since Putin's return to the presidency in March 2012.

Putin's conservative modernization drew on pre-revolutionary traditions, those of the Soviet period, and in the post-Soviet period on world experience of liberal and social conservatism. It sought to combine the liberal emphasis on economic freedoms with gradual restraints on individual and political rights and an organic conception of the larger community, the attempt to preserve Russia's distinctive traditions, to revive the Orthodox Church and to salvage something of the social policies of the Soviet period. A distinctive brand of conservative modernization, espoused by neo-communists and some national-patriots, sought the roots of the 'new community' in Russian traditions. Putin's rule represents a powerful combination of these attributes and adapts the modernization drive to Russian current and historical condition.

The very concept of democracy in Russia now appears de-legitimized, while the word itself is used as a term of opprobrium. The credibility gap between the statements of the leadership and the realities of daily life gave rise to what has been called a mistrust culture and a pervading sense of social nihilism. The ideology of conservative modernization means that the political institutions of the state became more ordered, leadership more resolute and consistent. In other words, political stability is better assured by an authoritarian regime than by democratic disarray.

In his book *Political Order in Changing Societies* published in 1968, Samuel Huntington argued that societies in transition to modernity require firm, if not military, leadership to negotiate the enormous strains placed on society by period of rapid change¹⁷. In Putin's Russia the "praetorian" role is being fulfilled by the presidency and his closest allies rather than the army. The presidency recreated a center not only for the nation but also for political society, the center that had crumbled under Yeltsin. Since 2012 the fear, however, that the strong presidency would not act as a bulwark against lawlessness but would itself be the vehicle for a new form of arbitrariness has proved founded.

Russia today has a hybrid political system, both democratic and authoritarian, but more and more leaning towards the latter type. The freedoms that had begun during glasnost blossomed into genuine freedom of speech and the press, and the variety of publications and the openness of their content were unparalleled in Russia's history. Censorship was explicitly forbidden and only the courts could permanently ban newspapers, and then only on specific grounds and after due warning.

The hybrid nature of authoritarianism democracy in Putin's Russia arose out of the conflict between ends and means and has a dual function: to undermine the old structures of social and political power dominated by the oligarchs, while at the same time to provide the framework for the growth of conservative forms that could

¹⁶ Markov, Sergei (2009). Conservative Modernization. The Moscow Times, November 30. Available at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/tmt/390539.html>; Trenin, Dmitri (2010). Russia's Conservative Modernization: A Mission Impossible? Carnegie Moscow Center, May 25. Available at: <http://carnegie.ru/2010/05/25/russia-s-conservative-modernization-mission-impossible>

¹⁷ Huntington, Samuel (1968). *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, p. 1.



ultimately stand on their own. Under Putin, moreover, regional and federal politics became more insulated from the pressures of economic interests, and the presidency operates less as a freeloading operator in the interstices of the state and society, as it had done under Yeltsin, but as part of a state order seeking to modernize the Russian state and society.

Negative Effects

This conservative modernization model has had many negative effects. The most notable are the scale and systematic nature of corruption and legal nihilism. Valery Zorkin, Chairman of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation and one of the most powerful personalities in Russia, has publicly admitted that crime is ingrained in the state apparatus and economy and that the interests of members of the state apparatus and business class run parallel with the interests of criminal circles. In an interview with *Izvestia* in 2004, he said that 'bribe taking in the courts has become one of the biggest corruption markets in Russia'. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the level of corruption in the judiciary increases the further down the hierarchy and further away from Moscow one goes¹⁸. In 2004, Russia was ranked 90th out of 149 countries in the Transparency International Global Corruption Index, whereas in 2013 it was 127th, alongside notoriously corrupt countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Ivory Coast¹⁹. It also ranked poorly on the World Bank's Doing Business Survey; it was 112th out of 185 countries, putting it on a level with ex-Soviet republics like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan²⁰. The Medvedev and Putin governments have however taken some measures to combat corruption and change foreigners' perceptions that Russia is not an easy place to do business. In 2010, Medvedev signed the OECD's Anti-Bribery Convention, even though Russia is only a partner of this powerful economic organization.

The Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR) and the Center for Strategic Analysis (CSR), two institutions close to the Kremlin, have drawn even more telling conclusions on the circumstances that Russia finds itself in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century. They maintain that the high level of corruption is the main factor causing the overall "crisis" Russia is currently facing²¹. The disdain for the state apparatus, which is felt by the vast majority of Russians, is slowing down the modernization of political institutions. The ruling power has 'slept through' the social changes brought about by a combination of a transitional economy and the loss of safety mechanisms for the vulnerable.

Russian society has undergone substantial changes in its structure and stratification and these are still in progress. With the development of global mass communication technologies and increased access to independent sources of information, post-

¹⁸ Blass, Tom (2007). Combating Corruption and Political Influence in Russia's Court System. Global Corruption Report 2007: Corruption in Judicial Systems. Transparency International. Cambridge University Press, pp. 31-34; Gilinskiy, Yakov (2006). Crime in Contemporary. European Journal of Criminology Russia, Vol. 3, p. 259.

¹⁹ Corruption Perceptions Index 2013. Transparency International. (2013). Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results>

²⁰ INSOR Experts Focus Attention on Fight Against Corruption. (2008). Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR), June 26. Available at: <http://www.insor-russia.ru/en/news/890>

²¹ INSOR Experts Focus Attention on Fight Against Corruption. (2008). Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR), June 26. Available at: <http://www.insor-russia.ru/en/news/890>



Communist citizens have come out of hibernation and started developing skills in grassroots self-organization. Millions of middle class workers and hundreds of youth groups, radicalized by a lack of opportunities to improve their social status, have joined up with the opposition intelligentsia. In fact, the stereotypical image of Russians' incapacity to react and take to the street when confronted with their government's abuses and incompetence was shown to be a thing of the past during Putin's third term as president in May 2012.

In reaction to what was perceived as widespread election fraud, a number of parallel institutions and social organizations sprung up to campaign against the authorities' manipulation of the electoral process and other undemocratic undertakings during the 2012 election. Social networks and projects such as the "Online Parliament" quickly gained popularity, often in response to the Kremlin's blatant disregard of people's fundamental civil rights. This heedless form of elite rule explains in part why freedom has been constantly decreasing²².

Many analysts predict that the next few years will bring forth a dynamic opposition force which might even surpass the one that swept away the USSR between 1986 and 1991²³. They conjecture that a serious deterioration of the economic situation and revived social disturbances in the Northern Caucasus will be major catalysts to opening the gates of discontent and letting loose a flood of political activism within Russian society. In the context of the crisis in Eastern Ukraine, and the economic sanctions that the EU and the U.S. have imposed on Russia in retaliation, the year 2015 may indeed be extremely dangerous for the Kremlin. This is the opinion of Igor Yurgens, Chairman of the Management Board of INSOR, who has openly acknowledged that Russia is "in a recession now, and soon we'll be in a free fall"²⁴.

International economic conditions have the potential to play a dynamic part in Russia's future. Growing global interdependence has caused the country's economic growth to become more dependent on foreign trade, forcing it to pay more attention to its competitiveness in world markets. Meanwhile, the "Great Recession" of 2008-2009 painfully disclosed the fallibility of resource-based economies.

The 8% decrease in GDP that Russia experienced in the wake of the 2008-2009 world economic crisis has brought about the realization among Kremlin insiders that not only is proper trade diversification of paramount necessity but encompassing economic modernization must be implemented promptly. There are serious economic vulnerabilities, not least Russia's heavy dependence on the export of its natural resources and the weakness of its manufacturing, service and hi-tech industries. Russia's educational, scientific and technological potential, like the industrial facilities inherited from the Soviet Union, have either run their course or been exhausted. Many

²² Livejournal, Online Parliament and Freedom House. (2011). The Voice of Russia, April 21. Available at: http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/radio_broadcast/36172287/49273362/?link-1

²³ See Fauconnier, Clémentine (2011). Conflit et Compétition Politiques Dans La "Démocratie Souveraine" : L'Opposition Vue Par Russie Unie. *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 42 (1), March, p. 17-36; Narizhnaya, Kristina (2013); Russians Go West. *The World Policy Journal*, March 30, p. 95-103. At available: <http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/spring2013/russians-go-west> ; Caracciolo, Lucio (2015). Democratship: The Ancient Heart of Putin's Regime. *Stratfor*, March 27. Available at: <https://www.stratfor.com/the-hub/democratorship-ancient-heart-putin%E2%80%99s-regime>

²⁴ Yurgens, Igor (2014). We Are in a Recession Now, and Soon We'll Be in a Free Fall. *Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR)*, November 19. Available at: http://www.insor-russia.ru/en/_news/11319



are no longer appropriate to the global economy, and have no place in a world of fierce competition between states, economies of scale and outsourcing.

Different Factions

Russia is thus facing another historic turning point. What political and economic direction should it now pursue? The specter of unfinished modernization processes has hung over the country since the time of Peter the Great in the early 18th century and the dilemmas faced by former and present elites are almost identical in terms of goals and constraints.

Russian political leaders, as so often in their country's history, are seeking some kind of magic economic formula which will satisfy everyone while preserving the political and economic status quo. Many believe a return to the pre-crisis situation is possible, while others are of the opinion that inertia will result in an uncontrolled and detrimental chain reaction which could nevertheless finally bring true democracy to Russia²⁵.

A good number of alarmist reports and analysis share a common conclusion: deep political changes, in particular an unwavering turn towards democratization and the rule of law, are necessary ingredients for a broader economic recovery and social well-being²⁶. Only such modernization will enable a cultural transformation decisive enough for the creation of a solid modern Russian identity and, from a legal point of view, a state based on the respect towards the law²⁷. Russia must take the Westernization track again in order to change the political tyranny of the few into a new value-based political system conducive to good governance, responsible leadership, innovation, efficiency and freedom²⁸.

Classifying the ruling elite into two factions – conservative and liberal – is an oversimplification, as the political debate is many-sided within political circles. For instance, the reactionary faction in the Kremlin defines modernization as a means of optimizing the power of the current political regime, as it improves its ability to rule the country. Belief in a long term and stable 'contract' between the state and the people is emblematic of this view of modernization. However, such a paradigm does not preclude liberal economic policies, a multi-party system and the use of social mobilization in bringing about economic modernization to catch up with the West – and now with many East and Southeast Asian countries – such as President Medvedev's "modernization program", launched in 2009 but consigned to the past after 2012, exemplified²⁹.

²⁵ See Vstrecha s Vedushimi Rossiyskimi i Zarubezhnimi Politologami. (Meeting With the Leading Russian and Foreign Political Science Experts). (2010). Available at: www.kremlin.ru/news/8882; For a detailed evaluation of relevant literature see: Diskin, Iosif (2009). Krizis... I Vse Zhe Modernizatsiya! (Crisis... Yet It's Still Modernization!). Moscow: "Evropa" Publishing House, p. 7-16.

²⁶ See Aslund, Anders (2009). Why Market Reform Succeeded and Democracy Failed in Russia. Social Research, Spring; Russia's Economy to Reach Pre-Crisis Level by Late 2012. (2009). RIA Novosti, December 16. Available at : <http://en.rian.ru/business/20091216/157255443.html>

²⁷ Rousseau, R. (2015). Russia's Attempt To Deliver Democratic Transition Is A Non-Starter. Eurasia Review, News & Analysis, July 14. Available at: <http://www.eurasiareview.com/14072015-russias-attempt-to-deliver-democratic-transition-is-a-non-starter-analysis>

²⁸ See Lindley-French, J. (2014). Greater Russia: How Moscow Exploits and Misunderstands History. The Europe's World, Match 17. Available at: http://europesworld.org/2014/03/17/greater-russia-how-moscow-exploits-and-misunderstands-history/#.Ve5wn_mSyRQ

²⁹ Andrey Issayev, Andrei (2011). Konservativizm: Oplot Modernizatsii. (Conservatism: The Pillar of Modernisation). Vestnik Edinoy Rossii, 4 (83), April, p. 2.



In foreign policy, the conservative faction's perception of Russia's place on the world stage borrows from Samuel Huntington's concept of a "Clash of Civilizations": the "Eurasian civilization" against the "European". It also assumes that the current international system is characterized by multipolarity and the predominance of military power over what is now commonly called "soft power".

The "Conservationists", as they are often referred to in the Russian media, are not a homogenous group. There are advocates of cosmetic changes and proponents of tabula rasa (the "ultras," so to say) who advocate starting with a blank slate. The "Chekists" and "orthodox" factions believe that democracy and liberalism pose a deadly threat to Russia³⁰. To some extent, the conservative modernization strand, in which the Russian Communist Party could be included, is ideologically close to the thoughts of the Russian traditionalists. It comes as no surprise that state bureaucracies, defense and law enforcement institutions as well as the army and large state-owned enterprises, especially in the natural resources sector and the military-industrial complex, have proven themselves bastions of conservatism³¹.

For its part, the 'liberal' faction within the ruling party, United Russia, which emanated from the Soviet and post-Yeltsin institutional structures (i.e., the Soviet and the post-Soviet nomenklatura) has a narrow view on modernization: it sees gradual political transition and liberal economic reforms as the means for preventing sudden and costly political revolutions, especially as the nation's temper is expected to become increasingly restive and assertive³².

The current situation in Russia is a remnant of – and reminiscent of – many wasted historic chances to modernize Russia for good and never look back. Such personalities as Nikolai Speranski, Pyotr Stolypin and Boris Chicherin, known as reformers in Russian history, strove to update Russia's political, social and economic fabric at the turn of the 20th century. The program of the historical Kadet Party (Constitutional Democratic Party) in the early months of the February Revolution of 1917 put forward reformist ideas which are still relevant in today's Russia³³.

During the 2011 celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation of the Serfs, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev identified himself with the modernizing tsar, Alexander II. The 'liberals' of today are loyalists who adhere to Pushkin's 19th century famous phrase: "the only European in Russia is the government". The impulse for reform, they believe, must come from above in response to the cultural process that comes from below. A contemporary political scientist would call this a "top-down approach" – the only one used in the last two centuries in Russia³⁴.

Despite some dithering over the reform issue, enlightened Russian technocrats, politicians and academics of today (Grigory Yavlinski, Anatoly Chubais, Mikhail Kasyanov, Alexei Kudrin, the late opposition politician Boris Nemtsov etc.) back a policy

³⁰ Idem.

³¹ Kateb, Alexandre (2014). La Russie, l'Europe et l'Émergence d'un Monde Multipolaire. La Tribune, August 19. Available at : <http://www.latribune.fr/opinions/tribunes/20140819trib000844968/la-russie-l-europe-et-l-emergence-d-un-monde-multipolaire.html>

³² See: Russia After Nemtsov. Uncontrolled Violence (2015). The Economist, March 7.

³³ See Tuminez, Astrid (2000). Russian Nationalism Since 1856: Ideology and the Making of Foreign Policy. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

³⁴ See Kennedy, Paul T., and Danks, Catherine J. (2001). Globalization and National Identities: Crisis or Opportunity? Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire. New York: Palgrave; Kortunov, S. (1998). Russia's Way: National Identity and Foreign Policy. International Affairs: A Russian Journal, 44, no. 4.



of integration with transatlantic institutions, although which institutions they mean is not specified. They consider Russia to be an integral part of Europe, and their hope for completing Peter the Great's work rests on the establishment and burgeoning of a truly Russian middle class³⁵. Under Medvedev's presidency, the liberal faction relied on the so-called program of the "four Is" or four key areas: Institutions, Infrastructure, Innovation, and Investment. Establishing the conditions for the development of small and medium-size businesses was a cornerstone of this program³⁶.

It is not far-fetched to imagine a political faction uniting the new faces of the democratic opposition (the oppositionist intelligentsia, mostly anti-Putin) and the Kremlin's liberal faction, however small and shadowy it is, and presenting a modernizing platform to the leaders of political institutions and the people. For this to happen, however, the two camps will have to pour some water into their wine. The oppositionist intelligentsia considers the liberal faction to be a PR project and liberal in name only, which, in fact, serves to strengthen the existing status quo. Yuri Afanasiev, a famous Russian historian, gave an interview to Ukrainian Week in 2012 in which he dissected the alleged liberalization mission of the liberal camp and drew the conclusion that expectations of real reforms are overdone³⁷.

The conflict between Kremlin factions about how to respond to Russia's decline in competitiveness has been intensifying in the wake of the 2007-2008 American-born global economic slowdown. Under these dire circumstances, ongoing squabbles about ideas and strategies of modernization are being used by the political classes to try to strengthen their position within the different factions. Nevertheless, the sheer effervescence among the growing middle class implies that a large number of Russians are now mobilized on issues of far-reaching political and economic importance, such as public-private ownership, the authoritarian political system, the corrupt and criminalized economy, government – federal and regional – accountability, infringement on press freedom and on the independence of the justice system.

The public debate has become infused with a new dignity and with new policy options. This unique development became more apparent in the run-up to the elections to the December 2011 State Duma and the 2012 presidential election. Russia now faces a momentous political crisis. The abuses of the Putin regime are so numerous that, without profound change, the protest movement is unlikely to be stopped. However, it is doubtful Putin will agree to reforms that would threaten his hold on power. The stage is therefore set for a protracted conflict between Putin and the opposition.

Along with political and socioeconomic changes, Russian identity needs to evolve, or else modernization will continue to be nothing more than an empty buzzword which fills campaign rhetoric and gets invoked for political gain. The root of Russia's dilemma is the total absence of any modern and integrated social or cultural binding force – using propaganda dating from the Great Patriotic War and Russia's imperial past does not play a major role in shaping a national collective mindset geared towards a modernization project. That's why, for many, future hopes lie in the initiatives of *civic associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)* to de-totalitarianize Russia

³⁵ Vstrecha s Vedushimi Rossiyskimi i... Op. Cit.

³⁶ See Rousseau, R. (2011). Modernization of Russia: Real or a Pipedream? G8 Summit Magazine, June. Available at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/55959348/1/G8-G20-France-2011-New-World-New-Ideas>

³⁷ Afanasyev, Yuri (2012). Russia Is Ruled by Feudalism. Ukrainian Week, February 13. Available at: <http://ukrainianweek.com/World/42179>



and safeguard the country from renewed authoritarian tendencies like Communism and Stalinism or their offspring.

Conclusion

The current economic recession, magnified by the Western sanctions, will unleash social tension throughout the vast Russian territory, although the likelihood of a serious political disruption is low in the short term. The capital of trust that Putin enjoys since his first presidency will not quickly melt away. Russians still remember that he managed to raise their living standards throughout the 2000s.

In addition, the armada of "political technologists" working for the Kremlin is constantly on its toes to find ways to divide and exercise mounting pressure on the opposition. When opposition leader Alexey Navalny filed for permission to hold an anti-crisis protest on March 1, 2014, the political technologists made sure that the Communist Party and about ten other groups held protest that same day, a classic post-Soviet states' tactic³⁸. After 15 years in power, they have become masters in the art of silencing the voices of those who take a critical view of the government's policies.

As inflation kicks in and the ruble's value stays low against other currencies, Putin's and the ruling party's reputation of being competent in running the economy will fade away. The modernization of Russia's political and economic systems has been put on the back burner in 2011 and reliance on nationalism, repression and frustration against the West will be the preferred strategy for the years to come.

The Russian transition was an attempt to provide an institutional framework for pluralism in society, to guarantee property rights and to overcome Russia's isolation from global processes. While democratic institutions have appeared, however wobbly and incomplete, it will take longer for the democratic culture and economic structures that can sustain them to emerge, for the unwritten rules of convention to impress themselves onto the written word of the constitution. The first post-communist Russian leadership laid the foundations of a new political order in the belief that Russian could only enter world civilization if it remade its own. In the second decade of the twenty-first century it was clear that both Russia and the world face challenges that cannot be resolved in isolation from each other.

³⁸ Englund, Will (2014). In Moscow, Tens of Thousands Turn Out to Protest Russian Intervention in Ukraine. The Washington Post, March 15. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-moscow-tens-of-thousands-turn-out-to-protest-russian-intervention-in-ukraine/2014/03/15/a3b35c34-caa3-49ee-9612-d6e883535eb8_story.html