

AUTHORITARIAN MODERNIZATION IN RUSSIA?

VLADIMIR GEL'MAN

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY AT ST. PETERSBURG
AND UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

This issue of *Demokratizatsiya* presents some of the first results for a research project entitled “Choices of Russian Modernization” organized by the Finnish Center of Excellence in Russian Studies.¹ While Russia has by 2014 abandoned the very discourse of modernization, which was so popular during Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency (2008-12), the time is ripe to discuss the continuing need for modernization in Russia after the Soviet collapse and its likely consequences.

The idea of achieving major economic and social advances in Russia without free and fair political competition formed the essence of the post-Soviet modernization project. Indeed, the outcomes of this project so far have been rather mixed. Even though in the 2000s Russia experienced impressive economic growth after a period of deep and protracted recession, these successes did not produce any major institutional changes which could bolster the rule of law, good governance, and protection of human rights. No wonder that developments in Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the increasing confrontation with the West call into question the entire project of authoritarian modernization.

Analyzing the politics and policies of Russia’s post-Soviet authoritarian modernization is important not only for answering the eternal Russian question “Who is to be blamed?” It is also relevant for assessing Russia’s prospects.

The contributors whose articles are published here deal with a wide range of issues, but they focused on the role of choices made by Russian actors under certain structural conditions. The interests, ideas, and perceptions of the various actors affected these choices, but they also often resulted in unintended consequences, given the many uncertainties of the Russian political, economic, and social landscape. Thus, the implementation of the “authoritarian modernization” project was far from its ideals: dictatorial trends in Russia increased over time while economic and social

¹ For details of the project, funded by the Academy of Finland, see <http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/crm/index.html> (accessed October 3, 2014).

well-being faced rising challenges and constraints. The contributions to this issue elaborate this common theme in a range of different contexts.

Vladimir Gel'man's article, "The Rise and Decline of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia," analyzes the logic of regime change in post-Soviet Russia. It argues that the rise of electoral authoritarianism was a side effect of the failure of democratization launched in the late Soviet period. This reverse tide distorted Russia's main democratic institutions, which the Kremlin used as tools of political legitimation and mimicry. But even though it is well entrenched today, electoral authoritarianism itself is vulnerable due to numerous challenges, which will affect its further trajectory, though in unpredictable ways.

Against this political background, the subsequent articles dealt with reforms in specific policy areas in Russia. In their article, "Paradoxes of Agency: Democracy and Welfare in Russia," Meri Kulmala, Markus Kainu, Jouko Nikula and Markku Kivinen analyzed the inconsistency of social policy reforms. Despite the authorities' loud rhetoric, which claimed that building a welfare state was a top priority, in fact, social policies turned out to be a loose set of incoherent and poorly coordinated measures, which contributed to rather diverse outcomes. The authors focused on the fundamental political problems of social policy-making in Russia, such as the lack of democratic accountability, the biased system of interest representation, and the bureaucratic inefficiency, both on national and subnational level.

Andrey Starodubtsev concentrated on the low priority assigned to the regional agenda among top Russian decision-makers in his article, "Agency Matters: The Failure of Russian Regional Policy Reforms." He argued that Russia's rulers were more interested in the loyalty of the regional authorities than in efficient territorial governance. Therefore, it is no surprise that regional policy remained of secondary importance, suffered from lobbyist pressure and arbitrary decisions, and that its institutional arrangements did little to help develop the Russian regions.

The complex of financial, institutional and ideological factors which define environmental policy in Russia form the core of Nina Tynkkynen's contribution, "Prospects for Ecological Modernization in Russia: Analysis of the Policy Environment." She examines the crucial role of these factors in implementing ecological modernization in Russia. However, the overall political environment is not supportive and likely to limit Russia's ecological modernization to relatively weak outcomes. In particular, the government emphasizes technological and managerial solutions to environmental problems, which are important, but insufficient for successful policy reforms in this area.

Katri Pynnöniemi's article, "Science Fiction: President Medvedev's Campaign for Russia's 'Technological Modernization,'" presents a crucial

assessment of Medvedev's failed attempt to modernize Russia's high-tech industry. According to her view, the Commission for Modernization and Technological Development of Russia's Economy projected science fiction writings into the agenda of public debates in Russia that helped develop positive imaginings of the Russian future. However, such discourses were largely useless in dealing with practical matters and implementing major changes.

Hanna Smith's "Democratization and War: The Chechen Wars' Contribution to Failing Democratization in Russia," reexamines the mutual influence of the Chechen wars and regime changes in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s. She extends the argument that democratizing regimes are prone to interstate wars by looking at an example of intra-state violent conflict, using the Chechen wars as a case study. She concludes that, while partial and inconsistent democratization in Russia contributed to the beginning of the first and second Chechen wars, both wars, in turn, played a decisive role in increasing authoritarian tendencies in Russia.

The big question mark after the title "Authoritarian Modernization in Russia?" is not only related to current events and the recent decisions of the country's leaders. It also reflects the dubious and controversial nature of the very project of authoritarian modernization. The articles gathered here raise further questions about its nature, mechanisms, outcomes, and consequences. Yet, authoritarian modernization is still at the core of the political and policy agenda in post-Soviet Russia, even during Putin's third presidential term. However, it remains unclear how long this agenda can dominate the country's politics and when, how, and in what direction it will be changed.

