

Russia at 2020: a Neo-Leninist Hypothesis

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Current thinking about Russia's future is dominated by two hypotheses: the official one of technocratic authoritarian modernization and the liberal market modernization advocated by the oppositional elite. I would like to expand the range of possibilities. I would also like to briefly specify the social constraints pointing toward further "de-modernization" by default and suggest the possibility for a renewed national developmentalism based on a broader social alliance. The latter might be called neo-Leninism.

Historically, from the sixteenth until the late twentieth century, Russia remained a great power due to a fortuitous geographic position, formidable armies, and a large state-controlled peasantry. Russia has spectacularly succeeded in three major surges of state power: gunpowder monarchy (Ivan the Terrible), bureaucratic absolutism (Peter the Great), and revolutionary military-industrial transformation (the Bolsheviks). The main measure of Russia's success is that it remained a major player long after fellow non-capitalist empires – China, Spain, Poland-Lithuania, Turkey – had succumbed to subordinate incorporation into the capitalist world-economy.

By 1945, traditional sources of Russian power were exhausted, as marked by the rapid disappearance of peasants (a worldwide phenomenon) and the pacification of core geopolitics. What remained, however, was still an exceptionally large and tightly centralized state with a major army, first-class science and education, a completed primary industrialization, and a huge endowment of natural resources. The next logical step in the trajectory of Soviet developmentalism suggested using these assets to negotiate admission into the world-system's core.

The main political problem of mature Soviet society derived from its own success. Now, instead of the peasantry, the rulers had to deal with strategically concentrated and mobile masses of skilled workers and the new intelligentsia. How were they to continue with an authoritarian developmentalist model minus Stalinist terror, but without allowing the new middle classes to restructure the political and economic structures in accordance with their aspirations and centrality in production?

No positive solution was ever found. In the meantime, the contradiction peaked in 1968 and again, far more dangerously, in 1989.

The uncoordinated series of *nomenklatura* counter-rebellions in 1990-92 delivered a disastrously Pyrrhic victory in this class struggle. The Soviet Union's sudden collapse left the intelligentsia and workers demoralized, insecure, and impoverished. The former *nomenklatura* largely preserved their control over sources of wealth and political power. But the collapse scattered and undid vast Soviet assets on the strength of which one might have hoped for a better position in the world-system. Instead of a place like Europe or North America, post-Soviets found themselves somewhere more or less resembling the Third World.

A pessimistic scenario would suggest that from here the likely movement for Russia is to go further down into the world periphery. Such a negative spiral is driven by the erosion of state structures, the fragmentation of the ruling class into rival oligarchies and provincial bailiwicks who cannot support institutions, and social groups that have embodied the core-like features of Soviet developmentalism. Fortunately, there is a certain "stickiness" to past success, which moderates pessimism regarding Russia. Specifically, this might mean two political possibilities emerging in the coming decade.

The first is the recovery of state power from above. Russia arguably has a long tradition of such recoveries. Its embodiment consists of the fractions of the ruling class directly associated with erstwhile superpower status. In 1995, Immanuel Wallerstein and I predicted that the next Russian president would have to be a military general or, as it happens, a KGB colonel.¹ Vladimir Putin achieved primarily two things. He brought to heel the so-called oligarchs and provincial governors. And he defied the West time and time again. Can this regime move further? That depends on its ability to discipline the state apparatus. The usual talk of corruption in Russia misses the key point. Putin curbed non-state activities that used coercion for private financial accumulation. Yet he had to "pay" his subordinates by granting them license to collect rents from their position. Sanctioned venality resembles the erstwhile absolutist monarchies. But this is a "blind" and wasteful kind of governance fraught with social resentments. Recall the French revolution.

This regime is not a "sovereign democracy" but rather a "sovereign bureaucracy." It did indeed become sovereign from foreign dictate or any domestic elite. But can it really act on this autonomy? Bureaucracies tend to become "sovereign" from their own superiors by insulating themselves from supervision, especially when private gain becomes the main preoccupation. Such situations commonly create periods of stagnation because the superiors prefer to go along and personally profit from the game. But once the ruler attempts to rule, this provokes resistance through foot-dragging or even a coup. Overcoming such resistance calls for some kind of purge. Yet a purge always goes with an intense ideological campaign both for propagandistic

¹ Georgi Derluguian, "Interview with Immanuel Wallerstein," *Медведь* ("Bear"), No. 4, pp. 22-24, 1995

justification and for the purposes of targeting opponents and promoting loyalists. At present, Vladimir Putin's regime has no such ideology and political framework, but hypothetically this could change in the future.

Alternatively, a push to discipline the venal state might emerge from below. Egypt is but the most recent example of how unexpectedly this can happen. Such events are notoriously impossible to predict; however, their structural parameters are calculable. For all the changes or talk of change since 1991, the social structure of Russia remains basically similar to what emerged in the 1960s.

On one side is a sort of *nomenklatura*, now recruited, promoted, and held together by personal patronage and cronyism instead of by the Party. The neo-*nomenklatura* possess infinitely less cohesion and *esprit de corps* than their predecessors, let alone a serious ideology. Their ritual invocations of state patriotism, meshed with imitative rituals of democracy, look unconvincing because their actual practices and dispositions are too hard to disguise. This certainly makes the rulers more vulnerable to popular contestation.

On the other side are workers who no longer enjoy job security, the intelligentsia who lost most of their institutions and group ideology, and now also a motley strata of sub-proletarians, mainly young urbanites with no stable employment, who can be ferocious street fighters but on their own hardly anything else.

The hopes often vested in the new middle class of businessmen seem to be largely false ones. This class, by the nature of their occupation, is too prone to strike personal deals with people in power. Some could join or even sponsor protests, but they are as likely to defect once it becomes too dangerous or their individual ambitions are met.

Although a ubiquitous and vocal presence in the capitals of all countries, liberal westernizers frustrated by their semiperipheral status sound ever esoteric to the majority, especially outside capital cities. Social democracy is not a suitable import either. This regime type occurs only in stable times and in wealthy countries. Social democracy, in short, is a core luxury.

Nationalism, then, seems the likeliest sentiment to hold together enough people in an uprising. After all, nationalism played a major unifying role in the 1989 rebellions across Eastern Europe or now in the Arab countries. But in an imperial country with large ethnic and immigrant minorities, nationalism is an extremely tricky proposition.

What remains? In another joint prediction alongside Immanuel Wallerstein, we must say the unutterable: Leninism. Today Lenin is forgotten despite his lingering monuments. This works to his benefit. Leninism is bound for a resurrection because there seem to be few acceptable alternatives. It would also bring four political advantages. First, Lenin was an improbably successful state builder who wrestled the remnants of the Russian empire from defeat, foreign interventions, and local separatism. Second, Lenin was an inspired modernizer dreaming of electricity (the part of the slogan referring to communism will be creatively forgotten). Third, Lenin was the first in the world to resolve by deed the Westernizers-vs.-nativists debate by being simultaneously both. He showed how a non-Western country could regain dignity and

at the same time adopt Western technology. In the face of a growing China, Russians should take pleasure in reminding their neighbors who inspired their own modern founders. Four, national heroes must be decisive and far-sighted leaders. Lenin took whatever train could transport him to Petrograd. He brought organization into chaos when power was “lying in the streets” and everyone else was defeated. He knew when to shift gears suddenly and decisively by accepting peasant demands for land, the cultural aspirations of nationalities, and the NEP (New Economic Plan). Finally, did he not warn about Stalin?

Lenin might turn in his sarcophagus from such essentially patriotic praise, but that will not matter. Nobody except a few pedants will worry what Lenin really thought about himself. What will matter is that Lenin was a world figure, a resolute and astutely inventive state-builder, a national unifier, and a modernizer, all without ever succumbing to Russian chauvinism. The political force capable of grasping the real potential of Leninism might yet be able to re-unify and re-industrialize Russia.

Will this mean socialism? Who knows today what is socialism? History is full of ironies. Lenin believed he was in the vanguard of world revolution while in fact he continued the reforms of the early twentieth century Sergei Witte by launching Russia into another upswing of power and prestige in the capitalist world-system. Today Russia is at another historical nadir. Her fortunes look uncertain. Another upswing might never come in our lifetime. Yet if it does, it will have to be, as always in the semiperiphery, through the restoration of state power, perhaps by traditional authoritarian means or perhaps through the resumption of democratization along the vector which began in the 1960s and peaked in the 1980s. The coming decade might prove crucial because the inherited, core-like assets could be wasted beyond repair. We can also securely predict that in any scenario much in the fortunes of Russia will be affected by global events and processes. What these shifts might be, however, defies prediction. The central condition will be the weakening of American hegemony and the rise of other centers in world politics and markets. In this situation, Russia might yet obtain the means and opportunities to do what Soviet *perestroika* failed to do. Russians will have to stay alert, open-minded, and determined – just like Lenin.