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MODERNIZATION, EUROPEANIZATION, DEPOLITICIZATION: ACADEMIC CONCEPTS AND POLICY CONNOTATIONS

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Introduction to the Theme

This paper applies methods of critical discourse analysis for uncovering the multiple meanings of the concept of modernization as a key component of the Kremlin's hegemonic discourse. In my analysis I shall link modernization with two other concepts – Europeanization and depoliticization - as major determinants of this discourse.

Intensive criticism of Russia's modernization agenda for its lack of practical results only sustains the validity of approaching modernization as a peculiar type of discursive practice, which I share in this analysis. Methodologically, I will stem from the presumption that discourse is not simply “a collection of words that represent non-linguistic things of reality”¹, but is the crucial shaper of meaning-making. Each type of discourse, in spite of its inherent instability, contains its “nodal points” of epistemic salience, through which discourse producers acquire and consolidate power². In a Foucauldian way one may argue that “there can be no possible exercise of power without certain ... discourses of truth... We are subjected to the production of truth through power... Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalizes, professionalizes and rewards its pursuit”³. Modernization is certainly one of these nodal points meant to augur “the truth” of Russia's transformation and thus to contribute to the constitution of the narrative of its officialdom.

¹ Peter Ives. Language. Agency and Hegemony: A Gramscian Response to Post-Marxism, in Andres Bileler and Adam D.Morton. *Images of Gramsci. Connections and Contentions in Political Theory and International Relations*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. P.66.

² Terrell Carver and Samuel Chambers. Introduction. Revealing the interpretations that change the world: the writings of Michael Shapiro, in Terrell Carver and Samuel Chambers (eds.) *Michael J.Shapiro. Discourse, Culture, Violence*. London & New York: Routledge, 2012, pp.2-4.

³ Michel Foucault. Disciplinary Power and Subjection, in Steven Lukes (ed.)... P.230.

The concept of modernization, which is an intrinsic part of the official – hegemonic – discourse of the Kremlin, might be dubbed both post-political and apolitical, since it legitimizes itself through the references to something presented as either obvious (“neutral”/technical knowledge formulated in rational terms, i.e. with references to a presumably undisputable source of epistemic authority) or essential for national identity and integrity. Yet what it hides is power ambitions embedded in the presumably rational, objective and commonly shared arguments. Ultimately, the de-politicized discourse of modernization turns into advocacy for a reinforced role of the state in many policy spheres, both domestic and international. Besides, the mix of post-political and authoritarian versions of modernization that prevails in Putin’s Russia creates discursive disconnections in relations with Europe, where socio-political connotations of this concept resonate much stronger.

In this paper I shall argue that the Putin regime can be characterized as a depoliticized type of power. De-politicization in this context includes the search for a politically neutral language of communication with the West, grounded in the idea of Russia’s indisputable (“natural”) belongingness to the European tradition of modernity. The very reference to Europe thus serves as a powerful tool for discursive depoliticization and “normalization” of Russia. It is against this background that the significance and the applicability of the idea of modernization have to be contextualized. The proliferation of different versions of the modernization discourse allows us to uncover a great deal of technocratic idealism as the constitutive feature of the Putin regime, including the belief in the applicability of the universal logic of administrative wisdom and managerial efficiency, and the projection of business concepts into the policy-making and social domains.

Modernization as Russia’s “Empty Signifier”

Along the lines of critical discourse analysis, I will approach modernization as an “empty universal”⁴, or an “organizing metaphor” for a “discursive polity”⁵. Modernization can be viewed as an “empty” – i.e. not attached to any specific meaning - signifier in a number of ways. First, it may have both academic and political interpretations, and be used in each of these discursive registers. Second, due to its breadth the concept constantly requires specifications in the form of multiple adjectives. Third, modernization inevitably overlaps with other adjacent concepts like development, progress, Westernization, Europeanization and even civilization.

⁴ Jacob Torfing. *Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges*, in David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (eds.). *Discourse Theory in European Politics. Identity, Policy and Governance*. Palgrave & Macmillan, 2005. P.16

⁵ Yannis Stavrakakis. *Passions of Identification: Discourse, Enjoyment, and European Identity*, in David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (eds.). *Discourse Theory in European Politics. Identity, Policy and Governance*. Palgrave & Macmillan, 2005. P.96.

Seen from a discursive perspective, modernization – unlike other catchwords semantically marking the late Soviet and Russian political regimes (perestroika, glasnost, ‘vertical of power’, etc.) - lacks a degree of authenticity, perhaps reflecting the deficit of authenticity of the entire Medvedev’s presidency. Modernization is an academic term migrated to political discourse, and it is this migration that constitutes the highest interest for analysis.

The logical linkage between modernization as a policy and modernity as a scholarly concept seems to be of utmost importance. Seen from this angle, modernization implies: a) the construction of a modern nation state guided by a “formal rationality”, and b) its inclusion in contemporary international society which is ostensibly grounded in a Eurocentric set of norms and institutions⁶. The policy of modernization in this sense may restrain power of individual states by imposing certain limitations on their domestic and international conduct.

Academic discourses on modernization are conducive to a couple of conceptual challenges for the Kremlin, both related – though in different ways - to politicization of the concept. One problem stems from the wide interpretative possibilities intrinsic to the idea of modernization, while another deals with its inscription into the debate on universality of the European conception of modernity.

Firstly, the broad variety of interpretations of modernization by different schools of thought makes this concept imprecise and even fuzzy. References to modernization in countries like China or Iran⁷ not only widen the concept, but also deprive it of its key contraposition with traditionalism and ultimately turn into a synonym for any type of development, regardless of its normative connotations. Since the concept of modernization seems to be far from self-sufficient and self-explanatory, it requires adjectives that infuse in it political connotations. In Russian discourse modernization can be “liberal” (as opposed to “conservative”, otherwise dubbed “archaic”⁸), “deep” (as opposed to “uneven”, “apical”, “peripheral”, or “spasmodic”), “comprehensive” (as opposed to “fragmentary”), “real” (as opposed to “putative”), etc.

The problem for the Kremlin at this juncture is not the conceptual breadth and uncertainty of the modernization concept as such, but the inevitable politicization of the concepts, i.e. its contestation and adoption for different political projects. Arguably, when launching the modernization discourse and elevating it at the very top of Russia’s domestic and international agenda, the Kremlin underestimated the politically divisive effects of the concepts, as exemplified, for example, in robust denial of the model of

⁶ Barry Buzan and Richard Little. World history and the development of non-Western international relations theory, in Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (eds.) *Non-Western International Relations Theory. Perspectives on and beyond Asia*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010. P.206.

⁷ I.V.Kudriashova. Iran kak sluchai islamskoi modernizatsii, *Politicheskaya Nauka*, N 2, 2012. Pp.121-151.

⁸ Eduard Chekmariov. Teorii modernizatsii i sovremennaya Rossiya, *Obozrevatel'-Observer*, N 9, 2009. P.18.

authoritarian modernization by authoritative experts⁹. These discursive interventions constrain the Kremlin's capacity of pragmatically utilizing the teleology of modernization for the sake of legitimizing managerial and administrative practices of the ruling elite¹⁰. The very emptiness of the concept, therefore, constitutes a logical trap for the Kremlin which seems to be unable to control the proliferation of political meanings attached to modernization.

The Kremlin's response to the annoying politicization of the idea of modernization seems to boil down to attempts of its anchoring in a Russia-specific context which is meant to stabilize its semantic dispersion. It is in this context that we should interpret the multiple attempts to inscribe modernization in religious or civilizational narratives¹¹ which, in spite of their supposed authenticity, on many accounts match the arguments of the Western 'critical neo-modernization' approach¹². Ultimately in many cases debates on modernization are often substituted by – or transform into - debates on civilizations, which testifies to the weakness of modernization discourse and its leaning to other conceptual fields.

Secondly, the very fact that academic theorizing produced two competing versions of modernization – one as a global projection of Western normative order, and another as coming in multiple forms conditioned by vernacular cultural identities – constitutes a significant political problem for the Kremlin as well. In spite of the rhetoric on multipolarity and multiplicity of civilizations, the Kremlin by default pragmatically (though not necessarily publicly) accepted the Western – and, in a more narrow sense, European - foundations of the modernization paradigm. The most illustrative proof for this acceptance is the fact that it is the EU that is the only Russia's international partner for modernization. Should the Kremlin believe in the (academic) conception of "multiple modernities", it would certainly launch a dialogue on modernization with its BRICS partners or "near abroad" neighbors.

Yet the implicit acceptance of the Western origin of the concept of modernization will hardly bring palpable political dividends to the Putin regime, since it contradicts to its core ideological assumptions:

- It leaves no room for rhetoric of Russian *uniqueness*¹³. It is the EU which offers programs of modernization to its neighbors¹⁴, including Russia, not vice versa. Having accepted the language of modernization, Russia, therefore,

⁹ Bobo Lo and Lilia Shevtsova. A 21st Century Myth – Authoritarian Modernization in Russia and China. Carnegie Moscow Center Report, July 2012, available at <http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=49116>

¹⁰ Olga Malinova. Eschio odin ryvok? Obrazy kollektivnogo proshlogo, nastoyaschego i buduschego v sovremennykh diskussiyakh o modernizatsii, *Politicheskaya Nauka*, N 2, 2012. P.76.

¹¹ Vladimir Pavlenko. Pravoslavie i modernizatsiya, *Obozrevatel'-Observer*, N 3, 2010. Pp.17-35.

¹² Richard Sakwa. Modernisation, neo-modernisation, and comparative democratisation in Russia, *East European Politics*, 28:1,2012, pp.43-57.

¹³ Emil Payn. Istoricheskiy beg po krugu, *Obschestvennie nauki i sovremennost'*, N 4, 2008, pp.5-18.

¹⁴ Dieter Mahncke and Sieglinde Gstohl. New Neighbors – New Challenges? In Dieter Mahncke and Sieglinde Gstohl (eds.) *Europe's Near Abroad: Promises and Prospects of the EU's Neighborhood Policy*. Brussels: College of Europe's Studies, N 4, 2008. P.9.

implicitly pledged to accept the legitimacy of the European normative order and its own intention to find a place in it, which is not guaranteed by the virtue of either geography or history.

- It runs against Russia's search for *equality* with the West, since the launch of modernization partnership implicitly confirms Russia's role of a junior partner of the West. In the late modernity, one may argue, "the non-West remains a silent spectator"¹⁵ of the predominance of the West. Russia's status as a modernizing country could thus be comparable to those Third World countries that were initial objects of modernizing by the U.S.-led West in 1950s and 1960s¹⁶.
- It significantly complicates the attempts to re-actualize the Soviet administrative practices, since Communism - along with fascism - is considered by the Western reading of modernization as deplorable deviation from the pathway to modernity.

Implications for Russia – EU (Mis)Communications

Modernization is officially articulated as one of the foundations for partnership between Russia and the EU, which from the outset was a form of legitimizing the Medvedev presidency by Europe, on the one hand, and promoting economic interests of major EU industrial and financial actors, on the other. On both accounts, the position of Germany seemed to be of crucial importance.

Formally speaking, the Partnership for Modernization (PfM) programme was initiated in 2010 at the EU-Russia summit. According to the PfM progress report (December 2011)¹⁷, there was a dynamic development of the programme, complemented with "modernisation partnerships" between Russia and individual EU member-states.

Yet the debate on the essence of the concept unveiled deep political gaps between the two "partners". *First*, as the joint letter of Foreign Ministers of Germany and Poland, Guido Westerwelle and Ryszard Sykorski to Lady Ashton made clear, modernization agenda in relations with Russia is more about EU's assistance than about partnership. The EU claims to remain "Europe's main embodiment of modernisation"¹⁸, especially in such areas as good governance, transparency, accountability, sustainable development, civil-military relations, etc.

¹⁵ Mustapha Kamal Pasha. Islam, 'Soft' Orientalism and Hegemony: A Gramscian Rereading, in Andreas Bieler and Adam D. Morton (eds.) *Images of Gramsci. Connections and Contentions in Political Theory and International Relations*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. P.155.

¹⁶ D.V.Efremenko. V poiskakh modernizatsionnykh orientirov v epokhu mezhdutsarstviya moderna, *Politicheskaya Nauka*, N 2, 2012. Pp.13-14.

¹⁷ Progress Report Agreed by the Coordinators of the EU-Russia Partnership for Modernisation for Information to the EU-Russia Summit of 15 December 2011. Retrieved 04.02.2012, from http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia/documents/eu_russia/p4m_progressreport_en.pdf

¹⁸ Petr Kratochvil and Elsa Tulmets. *Constructivism and Rationalism in EU External Relations. The Case of the European Neighborhood Policy*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2010.

Secondly, for European governments modernization is predominantly a social process aimed at establishing effective modern nation state, which definitely encompasses policies of eradicating corruption and mismanagement. “Modernization requires institutional change – indeed the development of a range of independent institutions and of the rule of law, and the curtailing of the power and privileges of the bureaucracy and of gigantic, inefficient, subsidized, and anticompetitive state corporation”¹⁹. This agenda in most European countries is largely completed, which leads to highly divisive political effects of the modernization concept: EU - Russian relations within the PfM framework are inevitably destined for asymmetry and inequality, and contain strong bordering (“Us” vs. “Them”) effects. After Putin’s resumption of presidential powers in 2012 it became a commonplace for EU experts to assume that the ruling regime in Russia shows no signs of interest to comprehensive modernization²⁰. The European message sent to Russia implies that in the post-industrial age modernization can’t be based on authoritarian mechanism of mass mobilization and administrative centralism, and requires different tools²¹ conceptually premised on good governance practices grounded in horizontal interaction, policy networks, public – private partnership, etc²².

Thirdly, what complicates the EU – Russia conceptual disconnections is that the EU does not identify itself unequivocally any longer with the idea of modernity. In the opinion of many European experts, the concepts of sovereign great powers and balance of power, to which Russia largely adheres, are “too modern”, “too Westphalian” and therefore seem to be inadequate for - and even incompatible with – today’s idea of Europe²³. A Russia adhered to a pretty modernist concept of spheres of influence will certainly be stigmatized by Europe for subscribing to obsolete worldviews.

This raises a question of whether modernization is a sufficient tool for fulfilling Russia’s double task of domestic reforms and international socialization. To Europeanize itself, Russia has to adapt some of practices of post-modernity and post-sovereignty (networking/post-Westphalian diplomacy, supra-nationality, cross-border flows and exchanges, multiple and unfixed identities, etc). Unfortunately, while reproducing pre-modern social and political practices, reminiscent of feudal times (like, for example, in the relations between the federal center and regions, or between the Kremlin and

¹⁹ Roderic Lyne. The Imaginary Curtain, in Piotr Dutkiewicz and Dmitri Trenin (eds.) *Russia: the Challenges of Transformation*. Social Science Research Council & New York University Press, 2011. P.281.

²⁰ Susan Stewart. Praemissen hinterfragen. Plaedoyer fur eine Neugestaltung der deutschen Russlandpolitik. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP Aktuell – 50, 2012. P.2.

²¹ Dmitri Trenin. Of Power and Greatness, in Piotr Dutkiewicz and Dmitri Trenin (eds.) *Russia: the Challenges of Transformation*. Social Science Research Council & New York University Press, 2011. P.419.

²² Andrew Hurrell. *On Global Order. Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society*. Oxford University Press, 2009. P.95/

²³ Derek Averre. Competing Rationalities: Russia, the EU and the ‘Shared Neighbourhood’, *Europe-Asia Studies*. Vol. 61, N 10, December 2009. Pp.1691, 1693.

corporate business), Russia moves away from both Europe and the kernel of modernization.

Concluding Remarks

Firstly, as this analysis suggests, modernization doesn't seem to be a concept to sustain the dominating narrative of Russian grandeur, since what it underlies is repeated failures of previous attempts to modernize the country and disconnections with the Europeanization framework. Russia's backwardness appears particularly visible against the background of those states that are successfully adapting to a post-sovereign, post-Westphalian, post-nation state, and post-industrial world.

Second, the discourse of modernization only strengthened Europe's discursive predominance over Russia. The structure of modernization discourse leaves at the EU (and its member states) disposal sufficient leeway for either narrowing or, vice versa, widening the inherently political distance between "Europe" and "Russia" as two inter-subjectively constructed communities. Discursively, the EU – with implicit consent from Moscow – plays the role of a source of international legitimation of Russia's modernization agenda, which means that Europe's growing disinterest in supporting modernization under the increasingly authoritarian regime in the Kremlin would with great likelihood signify the discontinuation of the modernization project – at least, as designed by the Kremlin at the times of bygone Medvedev's "thaw".