

The Modernization Trap

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When Russia's leaders spoke of modernization prior to the economic crisis, their words lacked conviction. But from the way that they are talking about it now, some members of the ruling elite seem to sincerely believe that the goal can be reached. The only thing left is to determine what is meant by "modernization."

The speeches and documents that the authorities have issued on the subject create the impression that a modernized Russia would be one with computers all over the place, wonderful roads, nanotechnology wherever we turn, and officials who, if they do take bribes, will be careful not to take too much. But for some reason this picture of the future fails to inspire, and it is no wonder that attempts to rally the public around this vision have proven unsuccessful.

The real tasks facing Russia are relatively simple: restoring industrial potential based on new technologies, revitalizing scientific institutions currently in decline, focusing on new development goals such as new forms of energy, environmentally clean manufacturing processes, increasing labor productivity and developing new forms of transportation. In other words, Russia should not repeat what has already been accomplished elsewhere but should produce whatever is in global demand. That is the only way to create a thriving new economy in the modern world. At the same time, it wouldn't hurt to emulate a few achievements made by other countries. For example, if Russia were to implement the same level of energy-conservation measures that exist in Western Europe, it would bring significant improvements to the economy and to the standard of living. But huge, expensive projects are not required to achieve this. What is needed are competent, professional public officials and painstaking efforts to resolve numerous minor issues.

Therein lies the problem. The current system is designed to perpetuate itself indefinitely into the future without any alteration. Even the most sincere and noble initiatives run up against a brick wall the moment that they require that something be changed. But how can Russia carry out radical modernization without changing anything?

It stands to reason that President Dmitry Medvedev wants to reform the country's political institutions, but it is not clear how he can accomplish this. The president can keep telling us about Interior Ministry reforms and inviting new people with new ideas into the ranks of civil service. But as long as the larger system remains unchanged, any new people will be no different from the old ones. Anyone wanting to serve in Russian government is invariably driven by a desire for power, money or both.

The main problem with the ideology of modernization is not political in nature but social. Reforms to the political system can be made by force from the top, but it is society that must be changed. And such changes would only threaten the profits, privileges and power

of the ruling class. Were it otherwise, the much-vaunted modernization process would have taken place many years ago because the material resources required for it have long been more than sufficient.

The peculiar form of capitalism that has developed in Russia is incompatible with modernization and democracy alike. True modernization is capable of delivering a deathblow to the existing system — something that nobody in power is likely to welcome.

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