

## RUSSIA IS FACING A DIFFICULT PATH OF MODERNIZATION

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There are at least three compelling reasons behind the choice of democracy as the central topic for the 2010 Yaroslavl Forum. Firstly, it is clear that in the long run civil liberties, freedom from an arbitrary power, and the ability to shape our own future – in a word, democracy – are concepts that continue to remain important for us all. Secondly, as important as democracy is, a great deal of work remains to be done in expanding its meaning in the face of complaints over growing inequality, the inadequate inclusion of minority groups, and general corruption of the economy and politics. This is a pressing issue, as the idea of democracy has recently become quite vulnerable and – as new surveys have shown – less attractive for the average person. Thirdly, democracy in practice has many regional incarnations, adding further potential for misunderstanding and disagreement.

Thus, the Forum served as an effective international platform on which to discuss these above issues and even to reach some level of consensus.

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**Historically, Russia appears to have modernized quite successfully.** The problem for the current phase of modernization in Russia, however, is that the old coercive methods of its implementation have long since been exhausted. Even the strong centralization of power that Putin reintroduced to modern Russia seems to have lost its potential for affecting significant systemic change.

For the outside observer, Russia continues to be seen as nobody's servant but its own. **The real ruler in Russia – again for the outside observer – is an autonomous Russian bureaucracy.** And now Russian leaders are seen to be facing another perestroika, one in which the ruling bureaucracy should be made less powerful and more accountable.

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In the past, concentrations of power at the top served to prolong great leaps forward. Is this still the case today? Can Russia reuse old blueprints for modernization? In answering these questions, there are emerge at least three compelling reasons why **modernization will be quite hard to implement and will certainly be a much longer process than initially anticipated.**

Firstly, the use of coercion is now very limited, and the use of real available 'power' in the form of state based accumulation would appear to contradict the basic interests of its main carrier – the state bureaucracy. Thus, the 'power' vested in the President and PM is not as omnipotent as it seems and in reality is rather limited in regards to

any larger scale 'modernization plan.'

Secondly, unlike all previous episodes of Russian modernization, the recent economic crisis has made all models based on Western development far less certain and far less attractive for many decision makers and potential subjects of change. Thus, **there has recently emerged a temptation to limit modernization merely to the transfer of technology.**

Thirdly, the part of society that is able to generate technological and societal innovations is still rather undeveloped in Russia. A dual society of 'haves' and 'have-nots' separated by a thin layer of a heavily bureaucratized middle class (estimated by Russian scholars as between 7 - 15 % of the population) can, at best, only produce isolated 'islands' of innovation. These islands of innovation are hardly capable of being linked with the greater part of the country, and most likely would serve foreign companies able to quickly implement 'Russia made' innovations, or the only Russian sector still capable of doing so – the military complex. **Ultimately, innovations have significant cultural and societal components that cannot be reduced to a relatively simple 'transfer of technology.'**

As it stands now, there is obvious and considerable risk associated with the implementation of a wholesale modernization plan in terms of the stability and coherency of the current ruling group. As history shows, any period of modernization generates its own momentum once the social forces unleashed by the state become an enemy of those who initiated the process. In this light, the first task of the current leadership of Russia should be to provide adequate change while striking a necessary balance between stability and efficiency. ■

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