**When Nationalism and Authoritarianism are masked as a heterodox fight against global neoliberalism: the disturbing case of Russia**

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**Why drivers of state evolution matter**

The state is central in commencing and modifying any and all market orders, a fact fully recognized by heterodox economists. Thus, an obvious line of inquiry for institutionalist scholars is to look at how the nature of the state and its relationship to its people are determined and evolve. There is a well-established consensus among institutionalist economists that in a given society the state should be seen “as endogenous to the economic system” (Cypher 2014, 252), having evolved from that society’s “unique cultural, social and political history” (Waller 2006, 31; Neale 1991, 472). This paper argues that it is also important to know to what degree the evolution of the state is controlled by cultural-historical institutions and what the role of dominant economic factors and human agency is in shaping the state’s development. The answers to such an inquiry matter because over the last twenty years, in some economies, Western conceptions of liberal democracy and human participation have been officially rejected in favour of military control and other authoritarian forms of regime. Often this rejection is carried out as a fight against global neoliberalism. To illustrate, in modern Russia, once obscure nationalist ideas, grounded in the belief that the country’s inherited non-democratic institutions and attitudes are immutable, and that Russia is thus historically and culturally predestined for its traditional autocratic path of development, have been revived and officially endorsed as a reaction against Western influence, primarily associated with harsh implementation of neoliberal reforms in Russia in the early 1990s.

In what follows, using modern Russia as a case in point, I inquire whether a state, having arisen out of and been shaped by pro-authoritarian cultural values, is destined to remain non-democratic. I argue that it is one thing to see the deadly deficiencies of neoliberalism, correctly described in institutionalist literature as generating “stagnation, volatility, and increased inequality rather than growth, stability, and the narrowing of income gaps” (Harvey 2010, 365), and quite another to use such well-deserved criticism of neoliberalist policies to justify, in Russia, an authoritarian, non-transparent and imperious state as the only alternative to a neoliberal state, under the guise of an enduring incompatibility between established Russian cultural traditions and Western values, especially Western respect for democracy, pluralism, individual freedom and the rule of law. To point out the harm done by cosmopolitan policies of free trade and neoliberal-inspired globalization is one thing. But to interpret the increasing strength of authoritarian Russia’s regime, characterized by widespread lawlessness rooted precisely in its historical backwardness and non-democratic past, as a welcome manifestation of greater multi-polarity in response to Western-led globalization (Putin 2015), violates global security and leads to isolationism, xenophobia and disregard for human rights.

To explain the short-sightedness of over-emphasizing culture and historicity in determining the non-democratic prospects of the Russian state, while overlooking the democratic promise associated with active individuals, capable of revising cultural norms and changing the nature of the state, I will devote the larger portion of this paper to discussing the return of an authoritarian state to modern Russia, now justified by an ideology of Russian cultural distinctiveness, inaccurately presented in a nationalist strand of Russian academic economics as an application of traditional institutionalism. Thereafter, I can return, briefly, to reminding us of the main determinants of the evolution of the state, as they are viewed in institutionalist analysis, which is neither methodologically congruent with Russian nationalist economics nor ideologically on common ground with it.

**Modern Russian authoritarianism and its political economy of culture-determined state**

At present Russia is known internationally as an authoritarian country characterized by extensive “violation of political rights and civil liberties,” “lack of meaningful parliament, judiciary, parties, and elections,” and a “vast expanse of injustice, corruption and repression” (Nations in Transit 2015, 4; Motyl 2010, 7-9; Gudkov 2011, 30 -33). The most recent Freedom House report indicates that in 2014, Russia saw its largest decline in democratic governance ratings in a decade; its average democracy score has fallen from 4.96 in 2003 to 6.46 in 2014 on a 7-point scale, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest (Nations in Transit 2015, 10-11). In 2011, the Economist Intelligence Unit had already downgraded Russia from a partially-democratic regime to an authoritarian one (Economist Intelligence Unit 2011, 10). The growth of legal order, which is the very foundation of government restraint and democratic freedoms, remains weak, with the Rule of Law index still virtually unchanged at the level of 22-27 percent since 1996, while for most OECD economies, this figure exceeds 95 percent (Worldwide Governance Indicators 2015).

In modern transition discourse, it is a prevalent opinion that political democracy in Russia, albeit an imperfect one and often referred to as “a twilight zone between electoral and liberal democracy” (McFaul 2001, 309), began to derail in the early 2000s. During the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, that democracy had emerged alongside corrupt privatization of former state property, resulting - in the context of a highly concentrated industrial structure - in the creation of competing oligarchic groups and their capture of the Russian state. Then in the early 2000s, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s authoritarian actions restored the state’s control over strategic industries, including natural resources, and transformed Russia’s political structure into a highly centralized variant of capitalism—state capitalism. Now as a major producer and capital owner, the state uses its increased power first to keep the remaining oligarchic sectors of the economy as well as resource rents under the President’s centralized control (Gaddy and Ickes 2005, 570-571; Goldman 2008, 102-116), and second to suppress public opposition to growing authoritarianism (Stoner and McFaul 2015, 175-176). As Richard Pipes observes, in Russia’s current autocratic state “citizens are relieved of responsibility for politics,” while “imaginary foreign enemies are invoked to forge an artificial unity” (Pipes 2004, 15).

Such a change in political atmosphere—from welcoming market reforms and political democracy in the 1990s to validating increasingly authoritarian state in 2000s—called for a change in ideology; Russia’s return to autocracy required “scientific” justification. The inward-looking conception of a “Russian special way” has become the preferred ideology of contemporary Russia’s political elite. That “special way” condemns Westernism and essentializes Russia’s non-democratic cultural and historical distinctiveness,1 thus appropriating a hundred and fifty-year-old Slavophiles’ assumed incompatibility between the Western values of individualism, competition, and legalism and Russia’s non-Western character—its glorification of a powerful paternalistic state, devotion to a strong leader, deep fear of disorder, and hostility to both competition and pluralism (Newcity 1997, 42-44; Owen 1997, 136-138; Reisinger et al. 1994, 187-188).

The strengthening of authoritarian trends in Russia’s political system took place alongside the shift in attitudes toward the state within post-Soviet Russian economics itself, a shift that was both influenced by the growth of Russia’s authoritarianism and at the same time contributed to it. Understandably frustrated with the failure of neoliberal marketization to bring economic restructuring and prosperity to the majority of population, many Russian economists began to advocate for a more expansive role of the state in society. Some Russian scholars adopted primarily Keynesian and post-Keynesian views of the state as producer and guarantor of a reasonable market, based on economic democracy and equality of opportunity, and emphasized remedial possibilities for the state in reducing free-market harshness and enhancing social justice (Popov 2007, Dzarasov 2010, Sorokin 2011). Others, however, not only embraced the officially favoured ideology but also provided a “scholarly” defense of the “Russian special way.” Their argument is that conducting “Westernizing” reforms in a non-Western society is futile; any effort to liberalize Russia has always failed and will continue to fail because traditional elements of Russian political culture—the “cult of the strong, hierarchical state,” respect for strict order, “domination of collective values over individual values,” “personification2 of political institutions,” and “veneration” of strong leadership—are most compatible with centralized governance and anti-liberal political economy (Olsevich 2002, 97, 107; Kirdina 2001,112-114; Surkov 2008, 82 -89; Glasiev 2011). Renowned scholar of Russian economic thought Joachim Zweynert labels this “pro-authoritarian” strand of Russian economics “nationalist economics” (2010, 551). Currently such nationalist scholars have become the dominant producers of an expected and widely encouraged non-democratic ideology for the authoritarian Russian state.

Since particularistic ideas, i.e., ideas particular to one society, the Russian one in this case, were once branded, not only in Western but also in post-1861 Russian and Soviet economic scholarship, as regressive and opposed to universalist ideas of modernization (Hagen 2004, 452-453), contemporary Russian nationalist economists deliberately seek to clothe their socio-economic views with a scholarly acceptable discourse. Most useful for their purpose are the tenets of traditional American institutionalism, above all, those concerning the important role of culture and historicity in evolutionary processes, which nationalist scholars have distorted into a theoretical foundation of and justification for the authoritarian specificity of Russian state. In this regard, Svetlana Kirdina, the Russian sociologist turned economist, is known well enough to have become representative. In the words of Zweynert, she was the first scholar from the nationalist school to offer an analytical framework for “the neo-Slavophile” argument “using catchy [institutionalist] terminology.” Thus she provided “a pseudo-theoretical backing for the increasing sentiment of Russian nationalism” (2010, 551).

In *Institutional Matrices and Russia’s Development* (a book popular enough in contemporary Russia to require a third edition in 2014), Kirdina argues that existing socio-economic organizations can be grouped neatly into two entirely incompatible major types (or institutional matrices): market, based on Western institutions, and planned redistributive (Eastern), based on a unitary political order, centrally regulated economy, supremely conditional ownership and vertical hierarchical authority (2001,108-113). She asserts that “for each country the governance of one of the [institutional] matrices over the other is usually constant during the course of history” (2013, 345). Therefore, even if “historically established” nation-state social structures are “deformed,” either by government or “by external influences,” in the long run these “social structures” will naturally return to their “dominant institutional matrix” (2014, p. 315). Her supporting tables of detailed characteristics of two institutional types have been discussed elsewhere (Kirdina 2001, 113; Zweynert 2010, 553) and need no repetition here. It is sufficient to note Kirdina’s conclusion that since “culturally justified” Eastern (redistributive) institutions have been dominant and “historically stable” throughout Russian history, “respecting and preserving” these institutions is essential for Russia’s successful development (2014, 315, 318, 321). Clearly, what should be “preserved” are the non-democratic institutions of Putin’s regime, which maintain the omnipotence of a centralist state and, necessarily, a disempowered society. As another well-known Russian historian of thought, Andrey Zaostrovtsev concludes about Kirdina’s analysis, in her approach “the current Russian authoritarian model [is] certified as a valid one with an almost infinite lifespan” (2008, 181).

Western scholarship does not disagree that non-democratic institutions of modern Russia are a product of its established culture. However, in contrast to nationalist economists who happily designate these non-democratic institutions as “historically proven” and “immutable” (Kirdina 2001, 70), Western scholars link the persistence of these institutions precisely to what it should be linked: Russia’s historical backwardness and missing market memory, especially the memory of practicing the rule of law, a state of affairs that resulted in the establishment of an antiproprietory, “predominantly anti-legalistic Russian culture” (Newcity 1997, 45; Pipes 2000, 204-207) and a largely non-democratic polity (Shapiro 1986, 40-41; Keenan 1986, 121-128). During the Soviet period, this established lawlessness was reinforced by arbitrary communist rule (Owen 1997, 26). Sovietologists and Russianists agree that there are few differences between the autocracy of Tsarist rule and the autocracy of the Soviet regime (Pipes 2005, xiii; Mullerson 1993, 473); Richard Pipes, in fact, sees this continuity of authoritarianism and lawlessness in the current re-establishment of autocracy in Putin’s Russia (2006, A14). It is also common knowledge among Sovietologists that, during the late 1960s and throughout the 1980s, the economic system of Soviet Union likewise was characterized by the absence of legality, prevalent corruption, falsified economic statistics, and booming parallel production (Katsenelinboigen 1978, Grossman 1982, Hewett 1988). Anders Åslund called Soviet economic culture a “form of kleptocracy,” in which “the custom was developed to steal whatever you could, and the limit was set by repression rather than by law or morality” (1999, 59), whereas Karen Dawisha labels modern Russia’s regime as “kleptocratic authoritarianism” (2014, 300-301).

Clearly, these lawless cultural traditions are suboptimal. History is not destiny. Russia’s economic backwardness did not create the supportive mechanisms for individual rights and democratic principles that Western economic development did, but this does not imply that Russia is predestined for non-democratic and kleptocratic statism or that autocracy is a genetic Russian trait. Russian institutions can be modernized in a way that is consistent with liberal democracy, enhanced personal freedoms and individual rights.

The inherited Russian respect for strong leadership could even be of assistance. As I have explained elsewhere (Klimina 2014), in modern state-capitalist Russia, a powerful government could nurture institutions that promote economic democracy and eventually political democracy, especially if there is sufficient political will, generated by pressure from below by citizens dissatisfied with excessive social inequality, non-democratic polity, and non-transparent bureaucracy.

This takes us back to the role of human agency in guiding state evolution, featured prominently in traditional institutionalist discourse, which offers a more nuanced understanding of the complex variables in evolutionary processes.

**Escaping cultural trap: institutionalist view on the evolution of the state**

Institutionalist research on the evolution of the state, while recognizing that inherited culture plays an important role in influencing the form and character of the state, also argues that [the future of the] a state is not fully determined by its history (Atkinson 1998, 886). In equal measure, it depends on the volition of individuals who, acting both singly and collectively, can and do purposefully amend institutions through rearranging power distribution. The institutionalist theory of human nature asserts that, on the one hand, “the individual with whom we are dealing is the Institutionalized Mind" (Commons [1924] 1968, 73), who is socially and culturally embedded and thus “cannot be comprehended outside the social whole” (Atkinson and Reed 1990, 1105), but on the other hand—and this is crucial for the institutionalist non-teleological conception of state’s evolution—, individuals are also learning agents. They are “always-changing ‘institutionalized personalities,’ sentient and thinking personalities” (Mayhew 2001, 240) who can adapt their activities and expectations to “incorporate changes into the existing order” (Hodgson 2000, 327; Jensen 1987, 1068-1069).

As William Dugger and Howard Sherman accurately observe, “the individual is not a cultural marionette because individuals can and do transform their culture through collective action and even through individual action,” while “culture itself is continually changing through myriad actions, inactions, and choices of individuals” (1994, 107). In this regard, soft power, defined by Joseph Nye as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion and payment” (2008, 95), is indispensable in further influencing attitudes, preferences, and choices of individuals. As Samuel Huntington points out, in transition to democracy, “‘Snowballing,’ or the demonstration effect of [earlier] transitions,” provides “models for subsequent efforts at democratization” (1991, 13) useful for actively learning individuals. Similarly, Anne Mayhew explains that the “social goals of individuals and of groups of individuals are shaped by visions of what is possible and by new understanding” (2001, 243). An example here is Ukraine’s Euromaidan Revolution of 2013-14, in which people demanded changes in line with what they saw in democratic European states.

Consequently, institutionalist scholars argue that political change, the starting point for the desired economic change, does not originate exclusively from the state, but through a combination of pressure from citizenry and reforms from above. François Moreau indicates that the state does not have “*a priori* privileged knowledge on the actions to be undertaken to increase social welfare” (2004, 851). Glen Atkinson clarifies that under conditions of pervasive uncertainty, when “there is no extant future path” but “only imagined likely and possible paths,” “if the imagined likely future path is deemed undesirable then we [as active individuals] propose actions to create a possible alternative path” (1998, 886). Contemporary institutionalist scholars insist that it is only through active individuals who “demand change,” thus “reducing the power of elites to resist change,” that adjustment of power balance in society takes place, such that “evolutionary change comes about” (Knoedler and Schneider 2010, 266).

In other words, while it is true that in an institutionalist account of an evolutionary process, chance and unexplained forces operate within a cultural and historical environment, evolutionary transformations are only partially determined, and are subject to any deviation brought about by citizens, who through their actions, direct and redirect state evolution, typically by changing the legal framework within which reform processes are taking place.

This understanding of the key drivers of state evolution, as articulated by traditional institutionalism, undercuts any ideological misuse of the institutionalist paradigm, such as has been promulgated in support of Russian authoritarianism. Culture is not a necessary trap that offers only one path of development; it is itself evolving in response to its active inhabitants.

**Notes**

1. A well-known Russian philosopher Nicholai Rozov aptly notes that in Russia’s present doctrinal alterity, “Russia’s ruling elites” have firmly rejected “Catholicism (Popery), Protestantism, freemasonry, aestheticism, feminism, toleration, and multiculturalism; unfortunately, freedom and democracy [also] fall into this category” (2012, 24).

2. Vladislav Surkov, the political advisor to President Putin and one of the architects of the revival of “Russia’s special way”, claims that in “our political culture the individual personality *is* an institution—by no means the sole institution but a very important one” (2008, 84).

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