



Cycles of Russian History: The Inner Driver and Actual Political Dynamics

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Abstract

Socio-political history of Russia is characterized by well-known cycles with the most frequent pattern (a circular dynamics): a repetition of three phases “stagnation→crisis→authoritarian rollback”. The first model includes two actors: ruler with strategies of repressive coercion and conservatism, and elite with strategies of honest service and corruption. The main effect of elite’s strategies is the level of so called resource balance (between state, elite, and people). Repressive coercion switches on the elite’s honest service that provides normal level of balance. In these conditions ruler’s strategy switches to conservation and elite’s strategy becomes corruption which decreases the resource balance. Then the social-economic and/or geopolitical crisis and instability begins. It turns to new authoritarian rollback when new pair of ruler and elite start again their strategies of repressive coercion and honest service. Other models represent various versions of complication of this simple scheme. The model components are compared with the specifics of Russian mentality given in such oppositions as “ours/alien”, “high serfdom/low profit”, “order/freedom”. The dynamic view enables us to pose questions about the conditions under which these crises may develop and be resolved in various ways, including the conditions under which the alienated, irresponsible, and repressive character of “Russian state power” may be overcome. The question is whether social groups that do not accept these features of the regime will be able to acquire a new worldview or platform (once again, a system of frames and symbols) for consolidating their forces, surpass the critical level of social support, and on this basis accomplish — through a series of impressive ritual acts and practices — a peaceful institutional revolution, a breakthrough to authentic democracy, a new pattern of sociopolitical dynamics, and a new logic of Russian history.

Keywords: Russian cycles, Russian history, macrosociology, historical dynamics, Russian mentality, liberalization, authoritarian rollback, state breakdown, stagnation.

1. The cycle dynamics in Russia: is it a disease or a country's fundamental nature?

National history is one of the main national sacred things for every country. In this respect Russia is characterized by ultradramatic strives and conflicts about history because of opposite assessments of past events both considerably longstanding (e.g. Peter I’ period) and Soviet era (especially Stalin’ rule), “Perestroika” and post-Soviet period.

These days Russia is ill. To follow a medical metaphor, national “health” is full realization of national potential, a sustainable growth and development of a society without failures, inhibitions, unjustified national sufferings and mass victims. The “disease” itself (as a basis of destructive transformations) is a mysterious inner driver that systematically generates these painful phenomena.

Medical terminology is used here just as a clarifying metaphor (partly as an analogy). The given approach is based upon a philosophic attitude: *repeating events are generated by a hidden general reason*. In order to change essentially these events the reason should be identified and properly modified. That’s why the medical metaphor proves to be rather suitable because the medicine since the time of Hippocrates, when it had been gemmated from philosophy, has acted precisely in this way.

If a country’s characteristic which repeats for centuries (a special cycle dynamics in our case) is an “incidental disease” or its inner nature? Here social theory transcends to philosophy of history. This question can be solved neither on abstract scholastic level nor on purely empirical one. My position is that Russian cycles and revolving “Russian power” based on coercion are result of a serious “national illness” which is not though a fatal essence of Russia. To support the position I point out the following considerations.

In case of “essence” the coercive relations and institutions would always reproduce anywhere in Russia. And inhabitants of Russia (Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Byelorussians and others) as carriers of this “essence”, when moving to other country, are supposed to build up there their accustomed institutions and practices with systematic restrictions on rights, freedoms, redistribution of property, etc.

Both conclusions turn out to be absolutely false. There have been a great number of precedents of self-organization based upon horizontal links and trust (starting from Old Believers’ communities, gentry and local communities, merchant guilds up to present civil movements and initiatives). It is true that in the Soviet time everything that was not included in the totalitarian vertical was purposefully destroyed, e.g. all self-organized communities such as Tolstoyans, original independent agricultural cooperatives, Esperantists, self-organized writer unions, literature societies and others. Independent trade unions are still nearly strangled. All this only emphasizes the very nature of notorious ‘Russian power’ but does not tell about the country and its people.

As having emigrated Russians almost never try to reconstruct the enforced relations and institutions that restrict rights, freedoms and property (the only example is mafia). Russian immigrants quickly adjust and integrate into social environment wherever they live. In the USA, Great Britain, Spain or Thailand they do it none the worse than others.

Were the authoritarian coercive power the very essence of Russia, the country would gradually find more or less stable condition acceptable for the main social groups. But for 400 years of valid history it has not happened so far. A thirty-year-long reign of Nikolai I (1825-1855) and almost twenty years of Brezhnev’ rule (1964-1982) can be called scarce exceptions, but in both cases ideological and social tension was increasing in the society, moreover, latent processes of degradation in the first case resulted in crucial defeat in the Crimea War and the following Great reforms, and in the second case it led to failure in Afghan War, economic and government crises, Perestroika, and collapse of superpower. What is the very ‘essence’ of the country which has not led to any stability acceptable for the country for ages?

All this proves that “the disease” is not at all the essence of Russia. The rise and destruction of coercive institutions and practices are mainly typical of the very “Russian power”, as well as of criminal communities in Russia (and this fact underlines deep connection between these structures).

Consider first the phenomenology we are interested in: manifestations of Russian cycles. We start not with pointing out repetitions and analogies (this has been done numerous by various authors) but with distinguishing main variables whose values cyclically vary in Russian history.

2. Long cycles and state success

The cyclically changing variable is easily reconstructed in the long cycle models of mobilization (Vishnevsky, 1997) and revolutions of service class (Hellie, 2005). Let us call it *the state success*, which aggregates:

- the level of geopolitical power and prestige,
- the level of military victories/defeats and territorial acquisitions/losses,
- the level of political regime's legitimacy,
- the level of social – political stability/tension,
- the level of economic and emotional comfort of powerful groups (their satisfaction with material and social conditions).

There should be mentioned that high parametrical values of *the state success* do not mean public contentment and welfare. During epochs of Peter I, Ekaterina II, Alexander I, Nikolai I, Stalin peasant serfs (later collective farmers) did not live peacefully and happily, but stability of coercive order was strong enough, rare riots were severely and effectively suffocated, that only strengthened the legitimacy of power.

“The first revolution of service class” in middle 16th century is famous for its military reform with introducing the mode of military recruiting *“po otechestvu”* i.e. by ancestry (for boyars', nobles' children) and *“po priboru”* service, i.e. not by ancestry (as Marksman troops were levied from low classes). This “revolution from above” starts the “Grozny cycle” (mid-16 – 17 c.), whose geopolitical successes include bringing upon control and capture of Novgorod, Volga lands, Ukraine, part of Siberia.

“The second revolution of service class” is famous for a number of Peter I's government reforms, as a result of which the unified gentry of service class appeared and regulated military and bureaucratic hierarchy (due to the Table of ranks) took place. The long “Peter I's cycle” (18 century – 1910-s) is marked by the rise in military industry, education, science, annexation of Baltic states, Finland, the Crimea, the Caucasus, Poland, Middle Asia, Manchuria, Far East and Alaska.

“The third revolution of service class” is the Stalin's “sharp turn” to the complete nationalization of economy and social life on the ground of massive centralized party. The long “Stalin's cycle” (1927-1985) includes the compulsory mobilization of resources (by means of collectivization and industrialization), the triumph of 1945, getting control over Central Europe, capture of Sakhalin and Southern Kuril islands, support of pro-communist regimes in the distant parts of the planet, obtaining the status of the world superpower, strong scientific, military technical and space programs.

3. Short cycles and level of freedom

The cyclically changing variable in the short cycle models of reforms/counter-reforms (Yanov 1981; Pantin & Lapkin, 1998) is *freedom as a measure of individual and property security, as well as participation in state management*. The integral parameter aggregates:

- the level of factual independence of individuals, safety from illegal coercion and violence;
- the level of private, civil and political freedoms, human rights;
- the level of property security, freedom for entrepreneurship;
- the level of participatority (possibility for people to take part in a society management);
- the level of constitutionalism (subordination of ruling elites to law)¹.

For the last 200 years main points of “liberalization” have been the following: early reforms of Alexander I (1801-1811), Great reforms of Alexander II (1859-1874), the October manifest and further establishment of Parliamentarism (1905-1917), February revolution and the policy of the Temporary Government (February-July 1917), NEP (1922-1927), the “thaw period” (1956-1968), Perestroika and partly post-Perestroika (1987-1998).

Main “authoritarian roll-backs” are periods of repressions and persecution regimes: the late reactionary counter-reforms of Alexander I’s and Nikolai I’s reign (1815-1854), the reaction during Alexander III’s reign (1881-1894), the Military communism (1919-1922), the Stalin’s regime (1927-1953), the Brezhnev’s “neostalinism” since 1968, establishment of “the vertical of power”, “the controlled (sovereign) democracy”, “the consolidated state” since 2000, especially, in 2003-2005, the reaction of 2012-2013 and the turn to overt aggression and the slide down to totalitarianism since the spring 2014.

According to the common system ideas, cycles of different length usually co-exist and overlap each other, so we are going to analyze both long and short cycles in the history of Russia (Figure 1).

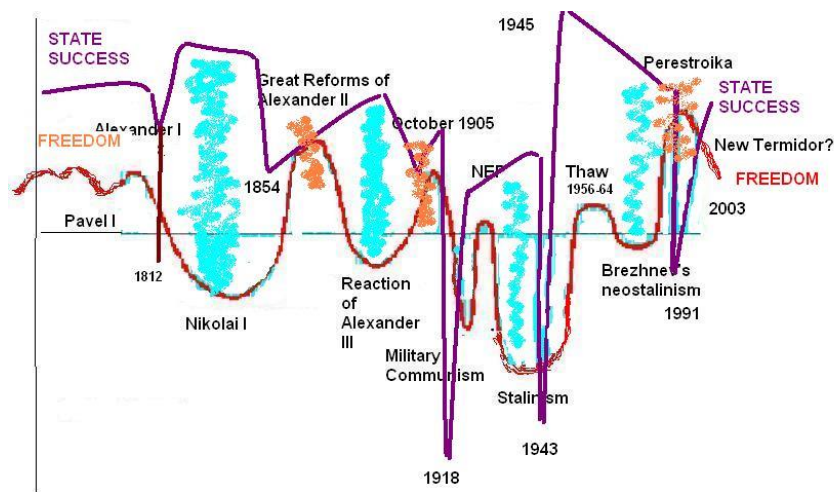


Figure 1. Dynamics of “freedom” and the “state success” levels for the last 200 years in Russia. The red line is a fluctuation of reforms and counter-reforms according to Lapkin and Pantin [1998]. The black line

¹ As it is seen, there is an overlap between different parameters here, both traditionally applied to a liberal regime (freedom from coercion, security of property) and to democracy (participatority, constitutionalism). Throughout the world they happen to disagree, ideologically they even oppose each other, and serve as slogans in the struggle against various political forces. However, in the history of Russia liberalization and democratization (and consequent refusals from them) made with a rare exception a single process. Thus, the integral variable “freedom” is taken here as a cognitive tool; nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish them if necessary.

presents changes in the level of the “state success” (geopolitical power prestige and domestic stability, power and regime legitimacy).

4. The space of historical dynamics

Let us consider social and political changes in the Russian political history simultaneously in two dimensions: the long cycles model of modernization and the short cycles model of reforms and counter-reforms.

The first dimension (the axis X in the Cartesian system) — is the *state success*, the second one (the axis Y) — is the *freedom as security for individuals and property* (Figure 2).

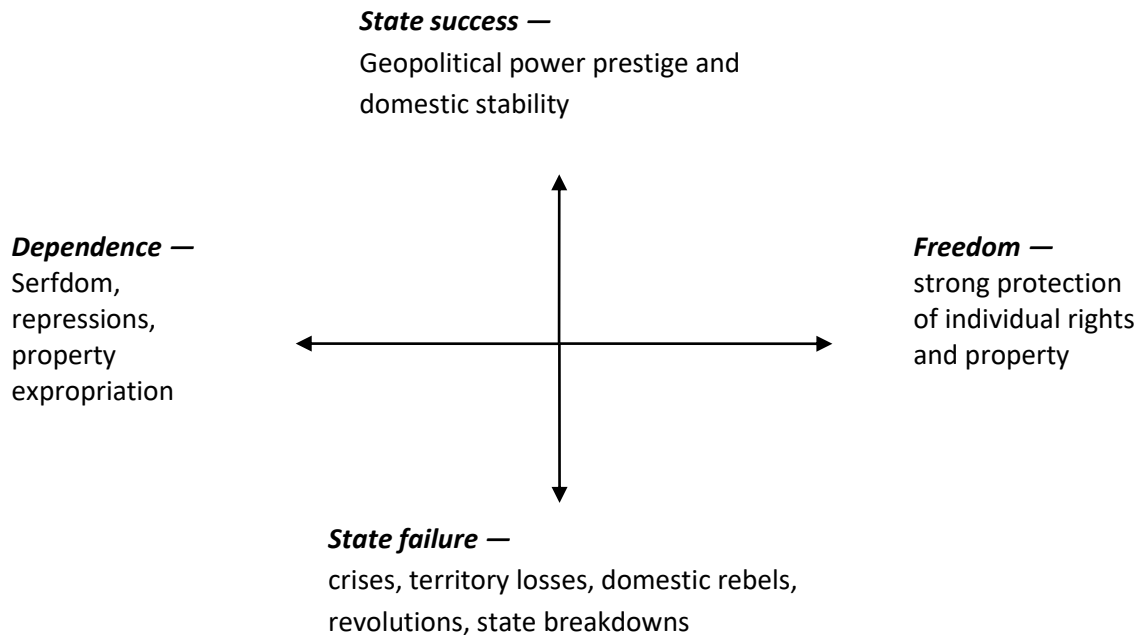


Figure 2. Two-dimensional space for visualization of social and political dynamics in Russian history

Tracing the trajectory of the Russian society within this two-dimensional model starting from the beginning of 17th century to the present moment allowed to include into analysis some unfulfilled political projects (e.g. constitutional amendments of Decembrists), proved the extreme ‘widening’ of dynamics from triumphs up to failures and riots, from liberal beliefs, projects, reforms up to revolutionary and state terror, repressions and totalitarianism. In spite of all this swaying the general picture does not seem to be chaotic but highly stereotypical and repetitive.

The phase 1: “Successful mobilization”. State rise and common emotional enthusiasm, a considerable increase in service class, conquests, growth of power. Domestic opposition and resentment are suppressed. Territorial expansion is successful, but it is always limited. Usually this period is followed by the Phase 2.

The phase 2: “Stability-stagnation-degradation”. It can be either relatively calm, even with some development of institutions or turbulent with moral degradation of elites and decay of the regime. Usually leads to the Phase 3.

The phase 3: “Social and political crisis”. Major uprisings, riots and rebels, peasants’ and civil wars, the most dangerous and deepest interventions. “*The crisis*” frequently leads to a bifurcation point, to divergence between the phases 4 and 5.

The phase 4: “Liberalization” can be either carried out from “from above” or “from below”, but, as a rule, it does not lead to any essential success in Russia. Usually it goes either back to the phase 3 “*crisis*” or leads to the phase 5.

The phase 5: “Authoritarian roll-back”. It leads either out of the “*crisis*” back to “*stability-stagnation*” or leads to “*successful mobilization*”, but under some circumstances it accelerates ‘*the Crisis*’ and slides down to the Phase 6.

The phase 6: “State breakdown” can be treated as the highest degree of “*crisis*” and its destroying tendencies. When statehood restores a new power it is usually rather weak, so it is more or less liberal and based upon a wide range of actors. But then a new “*authoritarian roll-back*” happens and leads to ordinary coercive order.

This sequence of stages can be presented in our parametrical space (Figure 3).

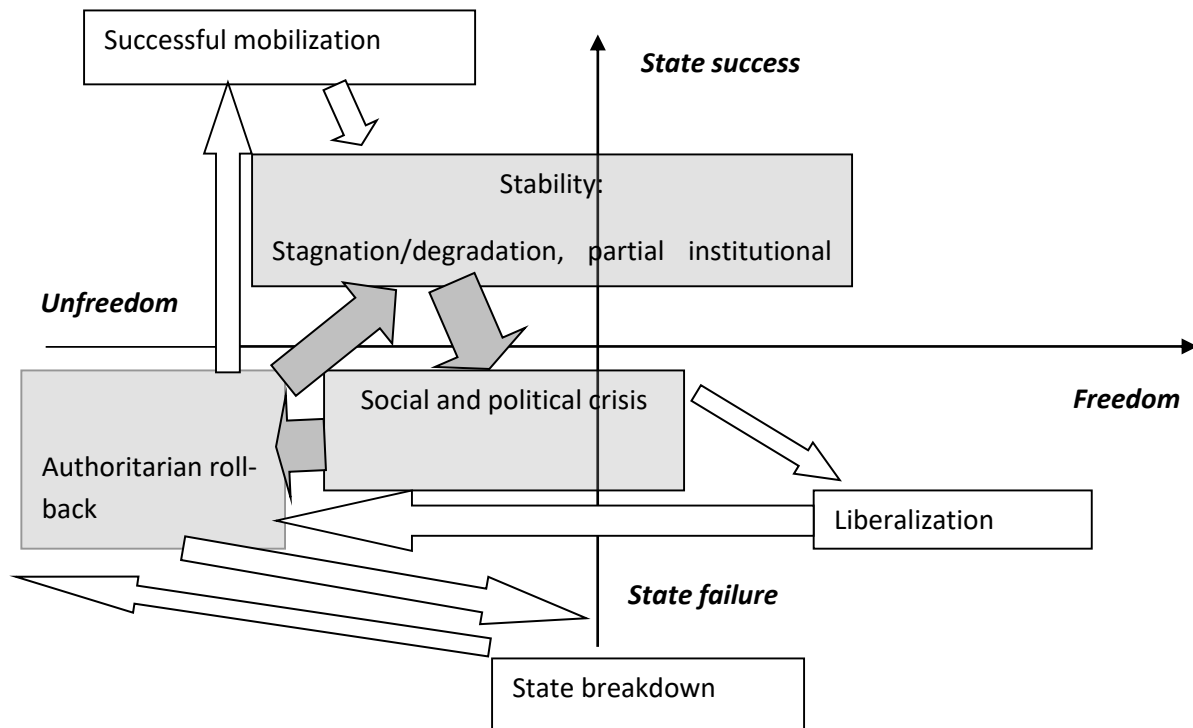


Figure 3. Main phases and transfers in the cyclic dynamics of Russian history.

NOTE: The contour of shaded blocks and arrows shows *the ring-shaped dynamics* of the most frequent transfers. The contour between “liberalization”, “state breakdown” and “successful mobilization” shows *the pendulum dynamics*

The ring-shaped dynamics consists of three central phases “stability” (more often as “stagnation”), “crisis” and “authoritarian roll-back”. They happen to be the most frequent and often lead to one another forming the same sequence: stagnation→crisis→roll-back→stagnation, etc.

On the one hand, “*institutional development*” (elaboration of legal codes, establishment of rights and freedoms, of representation institutions, of elections etc.) took place in Russia several times, on the other hand, it was usually combined with characteristics of either “*mobilization*” (e.g. Peter I’s epoch) or “*stagnation*” (e.g. Nikolai I’s epoch), that appeared more often, wider and stronger. The general structure of phases and ring-shaped dynamics also

indicates the domination of “*stagnation*” because slipping down to the “*crisis*” is the constant (determined) transfer. If ‘Institutional development’ dominated, the effect would be different.

Failures at the international level discredit the ruling group and often strengthen Western-oriented and/or liberal tendencies. This time some projects of liberal reforms are promoted. Sometimes they are put to practice or rejected (it depends on the power balance in the ruling elite).

“*The liberalization*” (“Let us do in Russia as in Europe!”) starts in a situation of Toynbean challenge and usually does not lead to positive changes but to the decay of social stability: growth of social differentiation and tension, dissatisfaction of governmental class, attempts of separatism. Apparently, the main reason is relaxation of authoritarian control that previously had played not only repressive but also functional and organizing role. This control established some limits of social exploitation, and these limits usually are removed during “*the liberalization*”.

Overall disappointment in reforms accompanied by discredit of the Western-oriented liberal branch leads to coming back of conservative political forces and to a new “*authoritarian roll-back*” (with slogans like “to restore order”, “to screw things up” etc.).

Here the mechanism is complicated by bifurcation. It depends on the roll-back leaders’ ability to involve the governmental class and masses in what direction the political system moves:

- (a) a new cycle of mobilization and modernization leading to growth of geopolitical power, to triumph at the international level, to domestic legitimacy and to a period of relative social stability (transfer to “*the successful mobilization*”);
- (b) reaction and repressions (“*the authoritarian roll-back*”);
- (c) violent confrontation (a risk of civil war and “*the state breakdown*”).

Comparing carefully events of the Russian history showed, on the one hand, absence of fixed repetitive sequence of phases, significant differences in some manifestations in terms of duration, depth and other characteristics, variability of transits from one phase into another, on the other hand, *regular occasions some patterns* (crisis→liberalization→roll-back; crisis→roll-back→mobilization→stagnation etc.). Persistent occurrence of the same phases and patterns in the historical dynamics of Russia proves presence and action of same *deep social mechanism*

Look at the obvious feature of the phenomenological model (Figure 3). An upper-right quadrant (combination of high state success and high level of freedom) constantly remains empty except for the slight presence of “*the institutional and civil development*” has that mainly gave place in Russian history to dominating “*stagnation*”.

Being at the height of its power the Russian political regime does not even try to liberalize. The attempts have place only in times of challenges and crises, although these attempts usually fail. The periods of crises and instability as a result of fluctuations lead to authoritarian roll-backs and new periods of stagnation, sometimes through the increase of successful (and usually coercive) mobilization.

5. Why do not liberal responses lead to success?

The generalization of the conditions under which liberal reforms were blocked (1805-1811, 1874-1881, 1906-11, 1927-1929, 1968-1971 and 2003-2005) resulted in following:

- Every time liberal reforms began, the main structure providing the functioning of the Russian society as a whole (territorial control, regulation of resource flows and taxation, system of dues and duties for citizens, world-views formation, etc.)

depended upon coercion that was directly implemented or supported by the authoritarian state.

- When coercive relations weakened and previous functioning regimes failed, the social and economic differentiation increased sharply. All these processes upset deprived people and discredited reforms. The Russian nobility as a basis of bureaucracy in beginning of 19th century was displeased by liberal reforms of Alexander I and Speransky (1801-1805). Both peasants and landed gentry were displeased by the Emancipation reform of 1861. NEP (New Economic Policy, 1921-1928) led to failures of food provision to the cities. Gaidar's reforms in beginning of 1990s led to overall poverty, great differences in incomes and widespread nostalgia for the Soviet times.
- When coercive relations weakened, rebellions and separate movements appeared at the country outskirts (Caucasus Wars in 1810-30s, Polish rebellions in 19th century, riots of Mujahidins of Central Asia in 1920-30s, the Hungarian riot in 1956 and the "Prague spring" in 1968, "velvet revolutions" in Central Europe and clashes in Tbilisi, Baku, Vilnius in late 1980s – early 1990s). The decrease of geopolitical prestige and need for a military and political mobilization discredited both the liberalizing authorities and liberal reforms themselves.
- Because it was the state that implemented reforms, politicians and local officials did not find it reasonable to contact with people and make any concessions that could reveal weakness of the state power. Liberal reforms were met by people (especially by intelligentsia) with great hope that later failed and made the conflict even more strained (the Decembrists, Russian populists – *narodniki*, terrorists - *narodovoltsi*, dissidents in the late Soviet epoch, democratic and patriotic opposition today).
- Sometimes a war became involved into the domestic politics. Every victory resulted in cease of liberal reforms (against Napoleon in 1812-1814, against Turkey in 1877-8, also the armed suppression of the "Prague spring" 1968 and the Second Chechen War in 1999-2000 should be mentioned here). On the contrary, defeats of Russia initiated reforms or operated as new impulses for them (a defeat in the Crimean War resulted in serfs' emancipation, failures and losses in the World War I led to the February revolution, failures and losses in the Afghan War resulted in Perestroika). The reason is the same: military and geopolitical success in Russia is associated with approval of the authoritarian state and mobilization regime. Consequently, the military and geopolitical failure discredits both.

6. Resource centralization, rent-seeking, and violence

Since Ivan the Terrible the hypertrophy of the centralized accumulation and resources allocation is typical in Russia. Redundant centralization of the resources is directly connected with providing loyalty of layers in the numerous governmental hierarchies (military, police, territorial ones). An unintended result of the centralization hypertrophy is that the biggest part of the territories, communities and residents become rent recipients who regularly receive their assigned part of resources and benefits according to taken positions but under weak bonds with the efficiency of their own work (Kordonsky, 2008). The amount of resources allocated to different governmental agencies corresponds with the status of an agency and corresponding service class. That is why an invariant political and economic feature of the Russian mentality is *the rent seeking*.

This attitude is realized in mass life strategies: to take a position within state power or close to it, to move within a carrier ladder with a secure rent. In socio-engineer strategies of establishing governmental institutions, agencies and public organizations the main principle is neither social demand nor efficiency and competitiveness but a steady income. This income is

mostly desired to be provided by the state budget or by any fund financed by informal state coercion (e.g. funds for KGB veterans).

Every social class (“estate”), every governmental agency and institution as organized parts of such estates strive and contend for state resources, i.e. rent. As far as redistributed are previously accumulated resources (public funds, budget) this interaction always is a zero-sum game: if one estate wins the other loses.

Such conflicts are not always solved peacefully by “administrative bargaining”. There is a vigorous battle to define resource invaders as enemies (Kordonsky, 2008: 116-117). Sporadically such conflicts grow into open violence.

Kirill Rogov uses the relationship between the rent and violence to explain recent social and political shifts. Banning violence in politics (refusal of breaking up rallies, demonstrations, marches, pickets, refusal of thrashing their participants, of opposition leaders’ arrest, of any political repressions) sharply *extends the circle of rent seekers*, since they, being unafraid of violence tend to cooperate and openly *demand “justice”: their portion of rent* which they consider to be deprived of.

Besides, the substantial costs are required to maintain the political positions (rights to redistribute the rent): media expenses, political parties, support of election campaigns, etc. If the state violence in the politics (especially the mechanism of repressions) is possible then it *sharply reduces number of rent seekers*. At the same time *the rent bonuses for the privileged recipients increases*, propaganda costs fall down for elites because costs are thrown off to the state (Rogov, 2008).

Thus, on the one hand, violence is the last argument in the struggle against the class groups for distributing resources and rent, on the other hand, the state violence is an effective way to retain privileges for insiders, who happen to be a relatively narrow recipients’ group of large rent beneficiaries. The state power provides this function through the fear and suppression of protest attempts coming from the outsiders i.e. recipients of a small rent.

7. Specifics of Russian economics and resource interactions

Vulnerability and non-legitimacy of private property together with legitimacy of redistribution. This well-known feature which is reproduced in Russia again and again is based on the previous practices of the estates’ distribution, on regular land redistribution in agricultural communities, on officials’ capture of the best lands and forests (i.e. “*oprichnye zemli*”, “belonging to the Cabinet of His Emperor’s Majesty”, “of special destination”, “of federal importance”, etc.), also on Soviet campaigns of nationalization and ‘collectivization’.

Old mental archetypes in proverbs (“land belongs to the God and to nobody else”, “the righteous labor will never help you earn stone chambers”), rapid enrichment of favorites and bankruptcy of those who fell into disgrace – all this prevents from turning property (especially large private property with large producing assets) into something stable, immutable, marked by traditions and lasting through generations.

Proximity to authorities is a key factor of economic success. In Russia for many reasons the strategy of acquiring personal preferences from the power has always been and still is the most effective one of all economic and development strategies (renovation of technologies, improvement of the production quality, reduction of costs and prices, diversification, massification, etc.).

This is connected with usual hypertrophy of governmental functions and, correspondingly, reallocating resources (getting beneficial state orders), with the absence of

protection against the local officials' tyranny (ease of getting the monopolistic position in the market for "their own"), and with almost complete dependence of trials (conflicts are solved upon the authorities' control), etc.

Detachment of owners from national and state interests. An owner or any other resource holder (an owner of a large factory in the Russian empire, a Soviet economic executive, a today's "oligarch" or a corporate top manager) for obvious reasons is mainly preoccupied with his or her own relationship with authorities, protecting own position, finding ways of handing down own status and capitals to descendants. It is impossible for national solidarity to appear on this basis. Orders from above to support any initiatives (in national defense, transport or energy sector, as well as in medicine, education, improvement of territories etc.) are treated only as an extra taxes.

Separateness of commerce from morality. Profit and commerce itself are roughly separated from any moral values in the Russian consciousness. "Duty", "service", "honor", "dignity" are closely related to either the service for the state benefit or to some abstract ideals ("arts", "science", "education", "creativity", etc.), but not at all to market competition, to fair salaries of employers and to reduction of costs.

"A merchant's word of honor" is a half-forgotten antiquity. In fact, honor and trust have place in modern business but as a rule among "their own" (a close circle – "*blizhny krug*"). Fast changing personal connections with public and bureaucratic authorities contribute more to flexibility and opportunism, whereas influential business communities generating strict moral standards do not appear at all or lose competition with achievement of personal preferences from authorities.

Success of isolated thrusts and failure of mass practices. State power in Russia, using the archetypes "service" and "duty" and possibility for the enforced mobilization of gigantic resources including human ones, is capable of mass achievements and thrusts (new military forces, fleet, Ural plants under Peter I, a success in organizing and supporting the military sphere and major military battles under Katherine II, the construction of railways, especially, the Trans-Siberian one, industrialization in 1930s and rehabilitation of heavy military in 1950s, a great victory over Hitler's Germany, power and space programs, the construction of channels, hydro-electro and atomic stations, cities in the North of the Arctic Circle, etc.).

At the same time, in the field of agriculture, light and food industry, in automotive, instrument engineering and other sectors of mass production the Russian economy is permanently left behind. Most likely, the mentioned above reasons explain this paradox. It can be tested by pointing out sectors of the least intensity for these features: the sector in which private property is protected most of all, the one in which the connection to the authorities is of the least importance for commercial success, sectors with importance of competition and struggle for consumers (e.g. in modern Russia such sectors are trade nets and cellular operators). Namely here one can observe the steady growth of quality, new services, and technical innovations.

The basic political and economic cycle in Russia is *a change in the rapid coercive state mobilization of resources and their gradual privatization by elites*. Elites always and everywhere try to accumulate personal and family resources and acquire inalienable property. The Russian specifics is that the most effective way to do it is neither creativity, qualification, entrepreneurship nor competitive production, but privatizing accessible part of state resources. It can be achievable by weakening or even destroying structures of enforcement, control and deterrence (a famous principle is "I obtain what I watch over").

According to the stated above specifics, property remains neither legitimate enough nor protected, the owners' moral is at the lower level, with alienation from national interests that gradually leads to various dysfunctions, "market failures" and crises, that new or old authorities

tries to prevail sooner or later. That's why the authorities implement coercive mobilization of resources down to expropriation (the phase "authoritarian roll-back"). The resource cycle is repeated further.

8. A model with switching strategies of actors

There are some models of interior social mechanism that generates Russian cycles, and here I present the most simple one. Its is focused on the control and resource strategies, and explains *the ring-shaped dynamics* (Stagnation→Crisis→Authoritarian roll-back→ Stagnation).

In this model only two *actors* interact. Each one has its own limited set of *strategies* (activity directions). Let the first actor be tentatively called the *Ruler*, the second one — the *elite*. (To make the *elite* more complex, the bureaucracy and holders of key resources can be divided).

Every period the Ruler carries out only one of two strategies: *an awesome coercion* (together with firm control of the elite's behavior, with sanctions, disgrace, "purges" etc.) and *protective conservatism* (weakening and atrophy of this control, calling on the Elite only to be loyal on order to conserve political status quo).

The elite carries out either one of two other strategies or both at every period of time: *service* (to the state, to the ruler) and *deforcement* (illegal privatization of state resources). The proportion of activity for each strategy changes depending on the ruler's strategy: the *awesome coercion* from the ruler leads to *service* of the Elite, and the ruler's *protective conservatism* switches on the Elite's *deforcement*.

Let us discuss the reasons why the ruler changes his strategies. Every strategy leads to its regular effects. Deterrent coercion after some period of time (only one generation?) results in the increase of *tension* and a *limit of the elite's discontent* (the last being connected with the excessive tension, psychological exhaustion, tiredness of fears, loss of loyalty, etc.).

When the limit of discontent is reached it switches on the strategy of ruler (a previous or a new one) from the coercion to the protective conservatism². It does not mean to stop the service strategy of the elite but simultaneously adds the strategy of the resource deforcement. The proportion of the last elite's strategy increases and almost substitutes the service strategy over time (one-two generations).

When the elite's strategy of resource deforcement dominates, it leads to the *limit of resource imbalance* (Rozov, 2011, ch. 6) and to three main effects:

- (a) tough *deficiency of resources* (public funds, budget, recruits) *off the state*, geopolitical defeats, the state incapacity to collect taxes, to support apparatus of coercion for guaranteeing domestic order;
- (b) severe *resource deprivation for the most part of the population* (poverty, hunger, increase in tension, protest moods etc.);
- (c) *overproduction of elite and increase of its appetites*, exhalation of conflicts between its parts and emergence of a counter-elite.

When the level of resource imbalance is reached, it always leads to a *social and political crisis*. This crisis is considered as terminating the strategy of ruler's *protective conservatism* (such attempts make the crisis deeper, so they are either stopped by the ruler or lead to an overthrow) and rapid weakening or even terminating of elite's *service*.

² In real Russian history it happens either after the Ruler's retirement or death when he is the main source of discontent, e.g. Ivan the Terrible, Anna Ioanovna, Peter I, Stalin, or through plots and revolts, these are the cases of getting rid of Anna Leopoldovna with Osterman, Peter III, Pavel I, Khrushchev.

The elite's *deforcement* can continue but if the elite splits, the strategies of *protective conservatism* and *service* become weaken or terminate, the resource imbalance increases, the crisis deepens. It happens to be hard or practically impossible to retain, so the existing or new elite becomes more and more anxious, needs protecting and ordering. It is ready to serve to a new ruler and endure *an awesome coercion* from the ruler, especially because at the beginning it is directed against rebels and losing political groups.

It is postulated that a way out of the crisis (within this conceptual framework, of course) happens under the only condition: when a couple (an existing or a new) of ruler and elite follows in concern with each other the corresponding strategies, i.e. the ruler begins the *awesome coercion*, and the Elite starts *service*. Consequently, the resource balance is restored (the state and people get their necessary parts of resources), and the cycle moves up the next *limit* of the elite's *discontent*. This dynamics is presented in the following scheme (Figure 4).

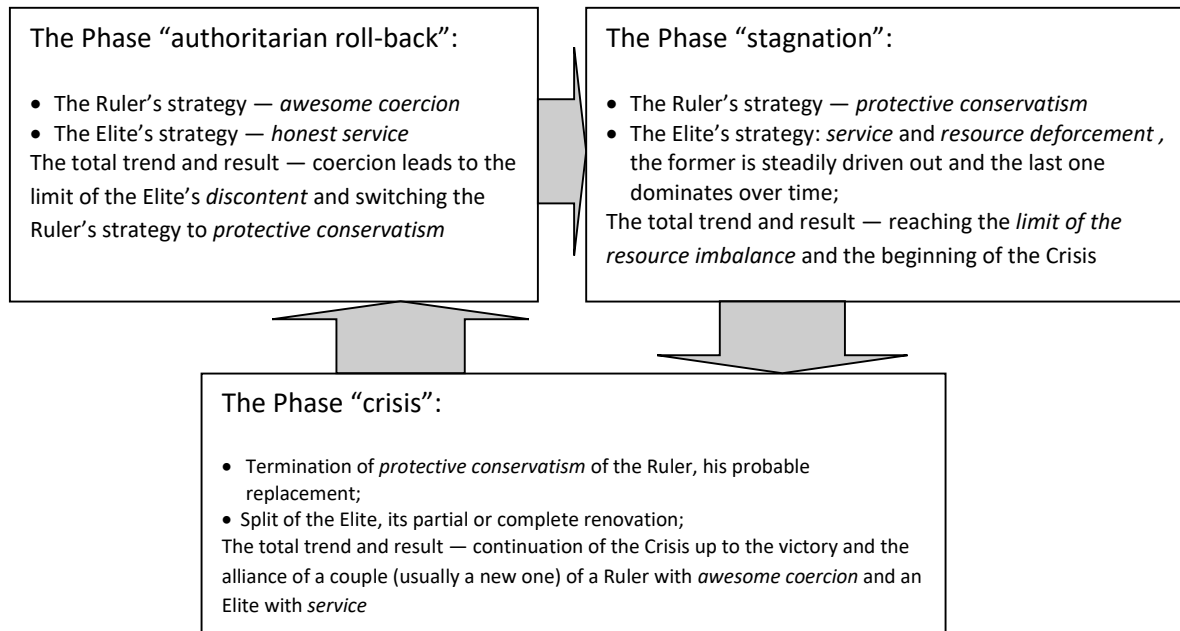


Figure 4. The model of phase transfers within the ring-shaped dynamics for two actors with switching strategies

9. An approach explaining stage trends in the ring-shaped dynamics

According to the model of switching strategies (see above), main trends that characterize each stage are considered as cumulative effects of changing strategies and practices used by actors. Why strategies replace each other? Because some remarkable changes in worldviews of actors occur: in image of situation, in interests and purposes, and also some structural factors change: in access to resources, in relations between actors, in outer dangers, etc.

Trends forming each phase are results of intentional and unintentional effects of actors' responses to challenges made in a previous phase.

The conclusion can be made. The track of Russian cycles has the following intrinsic nature: in disunity and crisis *practically all parties tend to choose a coercive, authoritarian mode of politics as the only possible one for consolidating and restoring social order*. It is a result of mental, institutional specifics which itself had been created and supported by similar previous choices. Then, when the coercion decreases, *all other factors of keeping responsibility and*

national solidarity do not occur to be strong enough, and it results in social, administrative, and moral degradation, the increase in disunity, conflicts, and final crisis. *These changes themselves support the same mental specifics and strengthen the inner cultural archetypes*. That is why the cycles are repeated again and again. As for the historical track, it becomes deeper and deeper.

10. The cycle dynamics in post-Soviet Russia

The theoretical interpretation of Yeltsin's and Putin's periods requires an additional analysis in the context of Russian cycles, because the social-political sphere was greatly complicated by multilayer processes. Here only a primary draft of the main structure is presented.

Undoubtedly, "the liberalization from above" was the main trend of Gorbachev's "*perestroika*" that ended by the false start of authoritarian roll-back (GKChP in August 1991) and the following collapse of the communist regime and the USSR. The weakening Russian state in 1990s led to disability to defend life and property, to collect taxes and pay pensions. Liberalization with new symbols and institutes ("market", "democracy", "freedom", "open society", "elections", "parliamentarism", etc.) encountered with the stereotypes of mass political consciousness and ruling elites' behavior that had survived. In brief, this political tradition rejects possibility to give and to take supreme power by result of elections. It is also presupposed that a ruler should "clean the field", i.e. put out of the way all probable or even possible rivals, even by use violence and fakery.

These patterns of political behavior could be seen in the bitter conflict and shooting the parliament (Supreme Soviet) in October 1993, in the constitutional fixation of the super-presidency, in the President team's reaction towards the victory of the Zhirinovskiy's party at the December Duma elections in 1993, in using the administrative resource and unfairness of the presidential elections in 1996 (when there was a real danger of the Communist leader Gennady Ziuganov's victory), and in the appointment by Boris Yeltsin of the "successor" - Vladimir Putin. Thus, the 1990s in Russia are, on the one hand, a conflictual formation of a new state with declared freedom and democracy, on the other hand, there were obvious steps towards authoritarianism as situational reactions to threats for the Supreme power.

During the first years under Vladimir Putin this ambiguity was maintained: rather progressive reforms have been done to help small business, but soon regional independence became repressed by "federal districts" and centralized financial policy. New power began to suppress freedom of speech (the attack against the old NTV), governmental channels and the central press were harshly subordinated.

M. Khodorkovskiy's arrest in autumn 2003 became the beginning for the real "authoritarian roll-back". The motion towards liberal democracy, although intermittent and inconsequent, stopped. Since that time it should be spoken about the implicit beginning of the phase "stagnation/decay". It has been manifested in subordination of courts, gradual reducing independence of the judiciary, unprecedented growth of corruption, and development of the state racket from coercive agencies.

In economics before the crisis 2008-2009 and then before 2014 the stagnation was covert because of the "golden rain" of petrodollars. In summer 2014 a rapid motion towards the phase "crisis" began after the Western sanctions and decrease of oil prices.

The victory of the first Maidan in Ukraine (autumn 2004) became great embarrassment and frustration for a ruling group in Russia. In Russian foreign policy emerged the imperialist approach. The war with Georgia in August 2008 was of great importance for further decisions in foreign policy: a military victory and a conciliatory reaction of the West for declaring independence by South Ossetia and Abkhazia (which had been Georgian ethnic provinces) became

a positive reward for the imperialist intentions. At the same time the Russian army, that had not appeared to be strong enough, got a stimulus for further massive training (German military instructors did it on a commercial basis). Thus the “Special Operation Forces” appeared and further “the polite people” in the Crimea in spring 2014.

In winter 2012 there were made some false “liberal” concessions (relief for the registration of the political parties, a return to election of regional Governors) as a response to mini-“crisis”: a series of street protests in Moscow and Sankt Petersburg against the “castling” (Putin’s and Medvedev’s exchange of the Prime minister’s and President’s positions) as well as against falsifications in the Duma elections. The violent suppression of protests on May 6 2012 in Bolotnaya Square that ended in trials (factual repressions) against dozens of participants meant the second wave of ‘the Authoritarian roll-back’ in the long rule of Putin (after the first wave in 2003-2005).

The attempt of the ‘Elite’s nationalization’ became an important part of this second wave with intention to enforce the bureaucracy and business for declaring and returning their foreign assets into Russia. In terms of the model of switching strategies (see above) the ruler tries to change the strategy *protective conservatism* into the strategy *awesome coercion* to make the Elite switch its strategy from *deforcement* to *service*. Alas, according to increasing capital outflow this attempt was not successful, and this makes it possible to claim: the ruling group’s and the Kremlin ideologists’ expectations (journalists from the newspaper *Izvestiya* and leading political programs of the main state channels) for some new ‘Successful mobilization’ will be futile in the near future.

The annexation of the Crimea with hopes for a “Russian spring” and for the following detachment of “Novorossia” from Ukraine (South Eastern regions of Ukraine along the whole perimeter from Kharkov to Odessa) pretends to the phase “successful mobilization” (the Empire’s triumph). The attempt failed, though the accession of the Crimea enhanced the Putin’s regime’s legitimacy inside the country.

Western leading states and the biggest part of the world community reacted differently to the aggressive imperial policy of the Kremlin, not as in case of the war against Georgia in 2008, and as far as post-Soviet Russia greatly depends on the credits in the external markets and on the imported goods, the sanctions become more and more hurtful, the exchange rate of the ruble is falling down considerably (move to the phase “crisis”).

11. The problem of overcoming painful cycles

Suppose in some approximation we could recognize painful knots (“syndromes”) of the mechanism that generates Russian cycles. It is a hopeless plan to cut the knot because the historical experience of the previous cuttings (Peter I’s reforms, Bolshevism, the Stalin’s “great turn”, *Perestroika*) shows that elites and political regimes change one another but these “knots” (syndromes of historical disease) remain and generate the cycles again.

To treat the disease of historical cycles is not enough to reveal them and to discredit (“deconstruct”) the corresponding cultural and psychological stereotypes that have been discussed. According to the used paradigm, the human psyche, consciousness and behavior are structuralized by interiorized social structures [Bourdieu 1998; Collins 1999]. It means that only an essential shift in the very basic social structures, including the position and role of Russia in geo-economics, geo-culture, geopolitics, and in relations between the state and people can free Russia from the track of painful cycles.

Besides, the Russian self-identification is strongly associated with definite sacral symbols (including Greatness, Truth-Justice, Order, Russian extraordinary mission in human

history, etc.), and an attempt to renounce them can result in either cynical nihilism or protest roll-back to revanchism.

It is impossible for the state with such massive historical inheritance to switch to the new logic of historical development “in a single bound”. New repeats in the same track of cycles are likely to happen. However, the paradigm of the historical dynamics excludes fatalism. There is a chance for the state to escape from the track, and the discontinuation of “political stability” gives the chance.

12. An approaching crisis: The likely dynamics and variants of results

When forecasting the course and the character of the expected phase “crisis”, the following basic conditions should be taken into account:

- The ruling group (since the first Ukrainian Maidan in 2004) has prepared for suppressing street protests, that is why so impressive “Interior Forces”, Special Police Forces and other (about 200-250 thousands) are well equipped, armed and ready for violent repressions;
- The real “non-systemic” opposition (outside of Duma) which has left after repressions of 2012-14 is inconsistent and weak, split and deprived of public support, especially in Russian provinces;
- Massed anti-Western and anti-Liberal propaganda is rather effective, it coincides with the public disappointment of Yeltsin’s “democracy” in 1990s, as well as half-forgotten imperial complexes, mentality of “rent-seeking”, prejudices against all politics as “dirty business”, etc.;
- As a result, the majority of Russians who suffer from economic problems and are dissatisfied with the regime and authorities looks for a solution not in liberal reforms, trustful courts, property security and political competence, but in the ability of a “powerful Tsar” (either an old or a new one) to “bring Order”, to repress oligarchs, to increase salaries all over the state, to freeze prices or even to bring the socialism back;
- The minority of socially and politically advanced middle-class (businessmen, freelancers, some reporters, scientists, university professors, doctors, engineers in large cities) do not have any experience of consolidation and united political action; they either passively wait for changes or think over plans to emigrate.

Thus, on the one hand, following the patterns of cyclical dynamics and the obvious acceleration of destructive processes will inevitably result in the phase “crisis”. On the other hand, we should not expect fast, peaceful and favorable (democratic and liberal) solution of this crisis.

The combination of all mentioned above circumstances will lead to stepped deepening of the crisis, a number of protests with aggressive suppression, temporal “frosts”, and new protest waves.

The regime strength will be unraveled not by mass protests but by events of another type: disunity of the elites, the appearance of a new counter-elite that cannot be suppressed, decrease of loyalty and obedience of the coercive apparatus. Just after the self-blocking of police and army, protests usually become wider that can result in successful revolution (that is the pattern of “velvet revolutions” in Central Europe, “color revolutions”, and successful revolutions during the period of the “Arab spring”).

The signs of these processes have not been seen yet. In the foreseeable many-stage and dramatic way of the future social and political crisis in Russia different leaders and slogans will appear and disappear, as well as various opposing groups will develop, unite and disunite.

It is impossible to predict this dynamics. Only the main ideological ingredients should be pointed out. Those ones that have already appeared are hardly to be substituted by something principally new. These ideas (symbols, values and principles) include Russian nationalism, Communism restoration, imperialist ideas, “European choice” (liberalism and open law-based society), left social democracy.

None of these trends will get the absolute monopoly. In the crisis dynamics of the Russian political future there should be expected the continuation of ideological and political fight between pointed trends and coalitions. Only in the case when this fight leaves street protests and violence, political repressions, criminal prosecution, when politics takes form of election campaigns and Parliamentary debates it will be reasonable to speak about some favorable solution for the crisis, about reconstruction of Russian national identity on democratic basis, and about the start of going out of the cyclical track.

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