NIKOLAI S. ROZOV

The Specific Nature of “Russian State Power”
Its Mental Structures, Ritual Practices, and Institutions

The author develops a dynamic theory of “Russian state power” as an ideal type and emphasizes the roles played by frames, symbols, and rituals. He considers the conditions under which the cycle of disintegration and restoration of authoritarian regimes may be broken.

Attributes of “Russian State Power” as an Ideal Type

Recent years have seen a promising tendency to shift away from mainly metaphorical description toward conceptualization of the phenomenon of “Russian state power” (Pivovarov and Fursov 1999) and even its operationalization, with attempts to test theoretical hypotheses (Pivovarov 2005, 2006; Dubovtsev and Rozov 2007, pp. 8–23; Oleinik 2010, pp. 69–91).

Let us take as an example “Russian State Power: Construction of an Ideal Type” [Russkaia vlast’: konstruirovanie ideal’ nogo tipa], an article by A.N. Oleinik (2010). The author formulates the following series of main attributes of this type of state power:

---


Nikolai Sergeevich Rozov, Doctor of Philosophy, is leading research fellow at the Institute of Philosophy and Law of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Siberian Division, and a professor in the Philosophy Faculty of Novosibirsk State University.
(1) state power that finds its justification within itself;
(2) state power as a goal in itself;
(3) coercive technologies for imposing the state’s will;
(4) an extreme asymmetry in the distribution of rights and obligations; and
(5) the absence of feedback.¹

What is missing from the concept “attributes of Russian state power” is a dynamic. On what do these attributes and their strength depend? It is difficult to answer questions of this kind within the framework of Oleinik’s conceptual scheme. The ideal-type approach itself is hardly adequate for solving these problems. A different conceptualization—more elaborate and allowing for dynamism—is necessary. Let us base it on the idea of the relatively stable cognitive, value, and behavioral structures of mentality and on the idea of interactive ritual as a sort of “social machine” in which the mental structures of the participants are formed and strengthened or destroyed and replaced by others.

**Frames and Symbols**

*Frames* are cognitive structures for schematizing experience or “defining the situation” (George Mead, Herbert Blumer)—that is, for making sense of phenomena of the social environment by *reducing what is happening to the known and familiar*; frames are usually not conscious, and in their external manifestations range from the pronunciation of generally known maxims and sayings as grounds for a relation or action to a verbal interpretation of one’s own or another’s position and behavior in a specific case (Marvin Minsky, Gregory Bateson, Erving Goffman). A dynamic is given by *reframing*: when different frames (usually frames that were previously latent) become operative and are used to make sense of what is happening.

*Symbols* are the religious, moral–political, and/or ideological sacred objects, ideas, ideals, principles, and values accepted by an individual or a group (Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Randall Collins, Yuri Levada, Lev Gudkov). Usually symbols are incorporated in one way or another into frames.

Specific combinations of frames and symbols (also called cognitive orientations, or orientations of consciousness) include the *worldview orientations* that are most important for our theme—concerning attitudes toward the people around one, society, the country, the state, politics, life, and so on.
Interactive Rituals: Foundation of the Genesis and Transformation of Mental Structures

Let us also add to our arsenal two apparently heterogeneous and incompatible concepts: the theory of interactive rituals (Gofman 2004; Kollinz 2002, chap. 1; Collins 2004) and the theory of operant conditioning (reinforcement) in the classical version of B.F. Skinner (1986, pp. 60–95).

We are talking about interactive rituals that are significant to their participants—all emotionally suggestive interactions among individuals in the “here and now” that result in change or reinforcement of elements of the individuals’ habitus—their orientations of consciousness, identities, and behavioral stereotypes.

Now we must present an interconnection of frames and symbols and corresponding typical rituals known and widespread in Russia that will explain the phenomenology of “Russian state power” and be supported to some extent by sociological data and historical observations.

“Our Own” and “Aliens”

The frame that divides “our own” [svoi] from aliens [chuzhie] is universal for all nations, ethnic groups, cultures, and civilizations. The Russian mentality is marked by a high degree of polarization in relation to things that are alien. On the one hand, there is a high level of rejection and non-recognition of the alien, suspicion and estrangement in relation to all that lies outside the bounds of things that are our own (especially outside a close circle of relatives and friends). On the other hand, many alien things are assimilated rapidly and effectively, if they concern not social relationships but everyday life, work methods, or technologies; many foreign ideas are appropriated and revered, especially in intelligentsia circles.

In addition, neglect for property rights is deeply connected with a political culture in which people regard themselves as subjects rather than citizens (Paips 1993) and with widespread indifference regarding state affairs and participation in governance. The ease with which our own are turned into aliens and aliens into enemies is connected, on the one hand, with the well-known traditionally militarized character of the Russian state and the “militarization of everyday life” (Kliamkin 2007, pp. 16–22)—that is, the organization of peacetime life in accordance with a military model; on the other hand, it is connected with conflicts over the redivision of resources (Kordonskii 2008, pp. 116–17).
As everywhere, the frame “our own/aliens” is supported by rituals of solidarity among our own and discussion and condemnation of the most antagonistic aliens. Characteristic of Russia (and evidently not only of Russia) is an especially marked closure of access to these ritual meetings; boundaries, moreover, are set by the social hierarchy.

Higher Ideals and Gain

It is characteristic of Russians to counterpose and draw a sharp dividing line between “lofty” or “spiritual” ideals (sacred objects, values) and “base” or selfish gain or profit. They have a weak capacity to unite these elements in an organic and stable manner and are inclined to opt for one pole or the other, followed by radical disillusionment.

As a rule, the semantic pole of advantage, gain, or profit is bereft of lofty value foundations. This is manifest with special clarity in contemporary slang. Here in Russia people “hack out the dough” [rubiat kapustu, srubaiut bablo], “beat off the cash” [otbivaiut babki], and so on.

The chief cause of this chasm is the fact that higher ideals and the themes of gain and advantage are symbols in quite different, almost nonoverlapping groups of rituals.

The Tsar and Supreme Power

The position of supreme state power in Russia is always personified. The official post occupied by this person is not necessarily the highest in formal and legal terms, but usually everyone knows “who is the chief”—and when people do not know, this leads to general anxiety and instability in the political order.

For the broad masses of the population, supreme state power is represented by this “head tsar,” whatever titles he may use. The ruling class has its own special mental characteristics, stereotypes, expectations, and frames, which manifest themselves historically in the following way. In Russia, probably not by chance, alongside the specialized branches of government (legislative, executive, judicial) and/or departments (offices, colleges, ministries, people’s commissariats, agencies, committees), a supreme power always reproduces itself with undefined—or, more correctly, universal and unrestricted—jurisdiction (the Tsar’s Court, the Imperial Court, His Majesty’s Chancellery, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [CPSU], the
Administration of the President). This *supreme power* tolerates no rivals or restrictions, and the majority perceives such power as the natural order of things.\(^3\)

### Allocation–Distribution and Division–Redivision

These are the chief Russian frames pertaining to social interaction with regard to material resources. The first pair fully corresponds to the redistributive type of economy in [Joseph] Schumpeter’s terminology and is closely connected with the resource policy of the authoritarian state.\(^4\)

Division (formerly *duvan*, meaning the division of loot among Cossacks, now “carveup” [*raspil*], meaning the division of budgetary funds among insiders) takes place among members of a group that has obtained complete control over a limited resource, while *redivision* is customary not only in peasant communes. The transfer by the state authorities of estates, land, factories, and corporations from one set of conditional owners to another is also a redivision; quarrels about rents among social estates [*sosloviia*], departments, and establishments are always struggles for the redivision of resources. Redivision and distribution are the functions and signs of a “real” or “strong” state power.\(^5\)

### Special Characteristics of Russian Public Institutions

The crucial institutions in Russia are traditionally those that specialize in regulation, coercion, and distribution (Paneiakh 2010) and institutions of mutual support.

*Regulatory institutions* work out and introduce rules (laws, instructions, norms, prescriptions, standards) and monitor or do not monitor their execution. Regulations in Russia are usually marked by their hypercoercive and prohibitive character, multiplicity, contradictory and confused nature, and frequent replacement. As is well known, “the harshness of Russian laws is softened by their nonenforcement.”* An important aspect of this is sharp expansion of the scope for administrative hightandedness and corruption on the part of regulators.

*Coercive institutions* (security/defense structures, *siloviki*) are organizations belonging to the apparatus of coercion, with the capacity and

---

\(^*\)A nineteenth-century witticism variously attributed to Alexander Pushkin and Nikolai Karamzin, among others.—Ed.
authorization to use physical force, arrest and detain people, and so on. Characteristic of Russian coercive establishments are hypercentraliza-
tion, subordination to supreme state authority, strong loyalty to state authority (except during the occasional crisis), lack of transparency, an
almost complete independence from public oversight, and a high degree of alienation.

*Distributive institutions* hand out resources in accordance with the
rules and standards worked out by the regulatory institutions “under fear
of force supplied by the *siloviki* and the rules prescribed by the regula-
tors” (Kordonskii 2008, pp. 116–17). Important parameters of change in
these institutions are not only the *scale and “fairness” of distributions*
(however this may be understood) but also the *degree of monopolization
of distributions*—correspondingly, the capacity of distributive institutions
to influence other institutions, social policy, and various social groups.
The protection of monopolies over distributions and the campaign against
such monopolies are significant aspects of administrative conflicts in
Russian institutions.

*Institutions of mutual support* are families, ethnic groups, and
networks of neighbors, people from the same region, friends, and
colleagues. On the one hand, Russian institutions of this kind play
an enormous social role, softening the pressure of state coercion and compensating for social atomization and the ineffectiveness of state
services. On the other hand, institutions of mutual support are them-
selves unstable: unlike state institutions or traditional kin and clan
structures, they reproduce themselves from one generation to the next only to a small extent.

**Mechanisms for Resource Redistribution in State Institutions**

Hypertrophy of the centralized collection and distribution of resources has
been characteristic of Russia since the reign of Ivan the Terrible
[1533–1584]. Hypercentralization of the redistribution of resources is
directly connected with ensuring the loyalty of lower to higher levels in
the numerous state hierarchies (military, police, territorial, sectoral) of
the regulatory, coercive, and distributive institutions.

An unintended consequence of such practices is that most territories,
communities, and private individuals become regular recipients of their
allotted share of goods and resources, taking the form of a sort of “rent,”
in accordance with the position they occupy, but with a weak link to the
effectiveness of their work (Kordonskii 2008). Even concepts of freedom are distorted: the masses understand freedom as state tutelage with a corresponding distribution of free goods—a sufficiently reliable tutelage but without excessive interference.

**Interconnections Among Mentality, Rituals, and Institutions**

Interactive rituals are associated with the generation and transformation of mental structures, but these rituals are themselves conducted within stable frameworks of social interaction—institutions. Mentality, types of rituals, and institutions are reproduced from one generation to the next through mechanisms of transmission—the socialization, acculturation, and cooptation of the young, among others. Institutions are not eternal: they can be destroyed, they undergo substantial transformation. All this takes place in emotionally tense and often conflictual ritual interactions among bearers of the same self-reproducing mental structures. The “three whales”—mentality, ritual practices, and institutions—reinforce one another and lend a specific character to the whole social regime (in its political, economic, legal, cultural, and other aspects). How does this general model explain the specific nature of “Russian state power”?

Within the system of centrally redistributed and widespread bureaucratic and professional rents, the chief events are obtaining a new position with higher rents (often including illegal administrative rents derived from corruption) or losing such a position, as well as intermediate signal events that give hope of the former or threaten the latter. All these events are key rituals that shape an invariant property of the Russian mentality—rent seeking.

This trait finds expression not only in common life strategies—to occupy a position and move up the career ladder with a reliable accrual of rents—but also in social engineering strategies for creating both state establishments and departments and public organizations. In each case, the priority is not social need or effectiveness or competitiveness, but the stable supply of rents—as a rule, from the state budget.

**Structures of Mentality Determine Features of National Character**

It is not difficult to show that the specific nature of these frames generates both the weak and the strong invariant features of the Russian national
character, especially taking into consideration various combinations of
the aforementioned frames and their poles.

Atomization, poor self-discipline, and a lack of the capacity for self-
organization are direct consequences of the rejection of everything alien;
so is the strict focusing of work and effort either on an intimate circle or on
forced subordination to power institutions (usually state institutions). No
room is left for broad horizontal ties or for creating structures of trust.

Legal nihilism is generated by the identification of laws and courts with
an alien coercive state (or, for insiders, with our own coercive state).

Maximalism and leaps from one extreme to the other are results of
perceiving one pole as our own, worthy of all our exertions, and reject-
ing the other pole as alien, an object of passionate condemnation or
contempt.

Adaptivity, independence, inventiveness, receptivity to things that are
new—these reflect an easy conversion of alien means of surviving and
gaining advantage into our own.

Fortitude in the face of deprivation, patience, emotional warmth, so-
licitude for one’s nearest and dearest—these are direct consequences of
many generations’ experience with surviving thanks to mutual support
within one’s own intimate circle and in resistance to the pressure of a
coercive alien state.

The salience of the West as a point of reference and deep uncertainty
regarding the worth of national foundations give rise to swings of the pen-
dulum—from worship of everything foreign and rejection of everything
Russian to envy of and hatred for all that is not Russian, xenophobia,
chauvinism, braggadocio, and vulgar patriotism.

Now, using the same foundation, let us explain attributes of “Rus-

sian state power” that have previously obtained empirical confirmation
(Oleinik 2010).

“Russian State Power”—Its Own Grounds and Goal

State power that is grounded in itself does not flow from external sources
of any kind—for example, expression of the popular will. Correspond-
ingly, representatives of state power do not consider themselves respon-
sible to anyone except their superiors. Here the operative principle is that
the person in power is always right. Orders and decrees are not justified
by reference to higher principles or in terms of common sense but simply
issued without discussion (Oleinik 2010, pp. 76–77).
The obvious (and by no means only Russian!) institutional basis of this attribute is a hierarchical organizational structure of the authoritarian type, in which positions are filled solely by appointment from above (if there are elections, they play a minor or purely formal role).

The basic Russian frames here are the isomorphic pairs the “chief and the organs (tools, subordinates, subdivisions) obedient to him” and the “tsar and his obedient servants.” Moreover, for the Russian leader or bureaucrat subordinates and superiors are our own. Quarrels do occur within the system of state power, but they are “inside the family.” The public, which is not completely subordinate and even talks about having “rights” of some sort, is immediately assigned to the sphere of the alien. The key symbols—a “Strong, Real State Power” and the “Tsar” (Supreme Leader, President)—are usually personified, and this always entails a danger of populist caudillism, of the development of a “cult of personality.” Both the state power and the tsar are our own for all who serve and participate in state institutions (regulative, coercive, and distributive). And such a state power cannot have its source and grounds in anything alien (for example, in the claims of citizens to rights and liberties).

A real competitor for supreme state power is a person capable of becoming a ruler. The first thing such a person does on coming to power is, in accordance with general expectations, to exert the utmost effort to secure and consolidate his position—that is, to deprive previous rulers of any hopes of revenge. This creates the prospect of a harsh new struggle, possibly a bloody one that leads to social chaos. For Russian rulers and elites, therefore, the chief political postulate, if not always consciously held, is that there must be no real claimants for supreme state power apart from appointees. The majority of the population agrees with this.

Participation in absolute power makes it easy to appeal to higher ideals (the symbols of Homeland or Fatherland) and counterpose them to the lower-level gains of any groups and individuals capable of caring only about their own private or “partial” interests. It is clear that ruling groups with such frames are not going to recognize any external—that is, alien—source of their power, whatever may be written in the Constitution.6

State power as a goal in itself means that its representatives are oriented toward the constant reproduction and expansion of state power; the decisions and actions of those who personify “Russian state power” are aimed, above all, at its strengthening and reproduction; other economic, political, and social goals are secondary in nature (Oleinik 2010, p. 77).
Again, we must admit that Russia is not unique in this respect. The overwhelming majority of states, churches, and national and international corporations, notwithstanding all the high-flown rhetoric about their “missions,” have real policies focused mainly on self-reproduction, on their own organizational and resource growth, on extension of their own influence, and so on.

The specific nature of “Russian state power” lies in its particular indifference to any sacrifices of a social, economic, humanitarian, ecological, or even territorial nature that rulers might make to preserve and strengthen their own power. Perhaps the sole exception is military and policing capability, which “Russian state power” almost never gives up; this again points to the deep foundation of its existence and of the self-consciousness of its representatives—coercion and violence, the ability and willingness to assert power and force precisely through such means.

It is easy to detect as preconditions for this the same frames of the special significance of our own (power) relative to everything alien and even to all aliens (which in Russia, alas, also includes the “dependent population”). Also of crucial significance is the institutional structure: it is necessary to answer and report only to one’s superiors, who are interested mainly in preserving the plenitude of state power and do not make special inquiries regarding the sacrifices made for this purpose.

**State Violence as a Factor in the Legitimacy of State Power**

The reliance on the direct use of force with the aid of the apparatus of coercion—the “law-enforcement” agencies—in present-day Russia is a masquerade covering the intimidation of associates, the confiscation of documents and computers, selective pressure regarding taxes, the seizure of property, and arrest and prosecution on the basis of faked accusations. This arsenal also includes threats to use force, manipulation through intentional distortion of the information available to subordinates, and so-called virtual politics—domination through deliberate restriction of the choices open to actors who are trying to act rationally (this is closely connected with the monopolization of the economy, with the handing out of monopoly niches to business structures close to the authorities). Also under this heading we have the structural violence in which imposed “rules of the game” constrain the choices available to subordinates, symbolic violence as an analogue of Soviet “ideological work,” and a sort of “zombification” (Oleinik 2010, pp. 77–78).
No state gets by without violence, but it must be acknowledged that large-scale use of violence, threats of violence, compulsion under fear of violence, and so on are characteristics of dictatorships with weak symbolic legitimacy.

Has the supreme state power in Russia always been a dictatorship so alien to the people, so illegitimate and lacking in symbolic justification? Certainly not. In our country people respect the state; many even love it. The supreme state power in Russia has usually enjoyed symbolic legitimacy and justification in the eyes of the people.

Exceptions are the rare periods in which a regime has been completely degraded and discredited and acute crises have led to revolutions, serious reforms, or state disintegration (1606–13, 1740, 1905, 1917–18, 1991). But after such political cataclysms “Russian state power” was reborn in a new guise and again loved and revered by many. Then why are practices of violence, intimidation, and compulsion so highly developed in Russia? Apparently, a dual answer must be given.

On the one hand, state power and the rest of society (the population, the nation) in Russia really are divided by the frame “our own—alien.” Neither the Germans nor the French nor the Poles nor the Americans deal with their own people in such a fashion (blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics have quite recently become our own for the Americans, if sometimes only at the level of superficial political correctness). For outsiders—the majority of Russian subjects (“ordinary citizens”)—the state in Russia is alien: people stay as far away from it as they can, but for some reason it is still legitimate.

On the other hand, much is explained by the tenacity of the deep symbols of a “Strong State Power” as the basis of “Order.” Violence and intimidation are graphic manifestations of “Strength” or “Force”; for this reason they provide “Russian state power” with stable symbolic legitimacy.

Cultural Foundations of the Political–Legal Rupture

The next attribute is an extreme asymmetry in the distribution of rights and obligations. According to M. Voslenskii (1991), those in possession of “Russian state power” always see themselves as in the driver’s seat: they decide where to go, at what speed, and whether to break the rules on the way; everyone else feels like a passenger in the back, whose welfare and safety depend wholly on external factors. The question is why the
subjects, deprived of rights and bearing the weight of obligations, tolerate this with so little complaint.

First, the idea of rights—especially inalienable rights and personal liberties—is by no means “natural” and “inborn,” as the eighteenth-century European liberals thought and wrote. In the Russian Orthodox tradition, the good things of life (possessions, livestock) were understood to be “God’s gift.” This partly resembles the West European idea that a person receives his rights (including the right to property) from God, but an important difference emerges in answers to the question of whether this gift can be taken away.

Perhaps what requires an explanation is the idea of the inalienability of “natural rights” in West European liberalism, whereas the mental ladder of God bestowing “gifts” on the tsar and the tsar bestowing them on nobles, army commanders, governors, and landowners reproduces and supports the ladder of the power hierarchy. If appointments and estates can be reassigned and land redivided, then where does the idea of inalienability, whether of property or of rights, originate?

In the Russian mentality, therefore, goods and liberties are bestowed as gifts and can be taken away. Excessive privations and disappointments lead to rebellions and uprisings, and even to widespread disorders [smuty] and revolutions. But until recently, only members of the intelligentsia who had adopted a Western liberal ideology fought for rights and freedoms in Russia. Those who fought most courageously were the defenders of human rights, who usually came from the same intelligentsia circles. The population at large may demand that it be given “its due,” that “what was taken away” be returned—in other words, may demand to keep rents given earlier, but as yet it does not demonstrate the ability to uphold rights and freedoms as such.

Obligations as a symmetrical counterpart to rights are also neither an “inborn” nor a “natural” idea. In the Russian tradition, all obligations are encompassed by the more general category of “service.”

Of course, within the hierarchy of state power there is a sort of silent bargain; a vertical contract is concluded regarding conditions of service and compensation for it (Dubovtsev and Rozov 2007). But this assumption, too, does not involve obligations accompanying rights. Rather, it is a deal regarding the balance between compensation (rents) and the degree to which service is onerous, dangerous, and skilled.

The issue with outsider populations is not so much “service” as “exactions” [tiagly]. Those taxed have no “negotiating power” in this vertical
contract. In stable periods, their chief strategy is to preserve what they have accumulated and minimize exactions (corvée, quitrent, levies, taxes). They may grumble in response to abuses “from above,” but the idea—let alone the readiness to act—of upholding the principle of equality of rights and legal liability arises only in the minds of a tiny minority. Properly speaking, the constant discussions of flagrant inequality, even if accompanied by condemnation, are typical secondary rituals; and it is precisely in these rituals that the frames and worldview orientations that register the impunity of those in power are established.7

### Specific Feedback Mechanisms

The next attribute of “Russian state power,” according to Oleinik, is the absence of feedback. Of course, feedback is not completely absent. Formal and informal institutions exist for complaints, denunciations, reports, statistics, and “letters to the editor,” supplemented in recent decades by sociological surveys and in recent years by analysis of the blogosphere.

We cannot say that Russian ruling groups have no interest in feedback. As in all other countries, an important problem for them is how to maintain control of the middle and lower strata of the bureaucracy and how to preserve “manageability,” which is constantly slipping. They may, therefore, encourage the feedback mechanisms mentioned above. What representatives of “Russian state power” cannot abide is feedback in the form of public oversight of their own actions, which undermines the plenitude of state power, its self-justifying and sacred character (see above).

At the same time, the mechanisms for examining complaints constantly fail and get blocked; reports and statistics are filled with exaggerations of achievements and outright lies, while denunciations can be used to settle scores. As a result, the most effective feedback comes from social unrest, protests, and strikes, as well as from accidents.

In terms of the public good, such feedback is expensive and inefficient and tends to occur only once. Each time it does, however, those in power try to demonstrate their ability to act quickly and decisively, resorting in most cases to prohibition and repression, which again strengthen the chief attributes of “Russian state power.”

Beyond a doubt, the writing and examination of complaints and denunciations, the work of “high commissions” to investigate the causes
of accidents or strikes, the subsequent sanctions—all these are emotion-filled rituals. Consequently, they actualize and support certain frames, symbols, orientations, and social structures.

The frames actualized are mainly of the type “The subject appeals to the High Authority for protection against oppression” or “The High Authority exposes the causes of calamities and sternly punishes the culprits.” With such frames dominant in the minds of rulers and ruled, alternative forms of feedback (through public opinion, negotiations with the opposition and social movements, elections, referendums, etc.) will be rejected.

The Ritual Basis of the Tenacity of “Russian State Power”

What kinds of rituals bind these diverse components into a whole? What convinces both insiders (top officials and the functionaries and ideologues who serve them) and outsiders (the common people, those members of the intelligentsia who are not “given a place at the table”) of the strength and resilience of “Russian state power”?

Of course, all the menacing public statements, widely broadcast on television, made by the Kremlin and local leaders—expressing “solicitude for the country and the people” while asserting their own irreplaceability and in all situations handing out orders, admonitions, and “public floggings” to lower-level officials—are ritualistic in nature.8 Judging by the “teflon ratings” of the symbolic leaders, these “staged” rituals make an effective impression on the masses. Another type of ritual, however, is crucial in maintaining and strengthening the phenomenon of “Russian state power.” This is none other than the actual application of state coercion: arrest, detention, sentencing, confiscation of property. Such primary rituals generate the strongest, most prolonged expanding circles of secondary rituals—emotion-filled discussions of past events.

A striking example from recent history is the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky at Novosibirsk’s Tolmachevo Airport in October 2003 and his imprisonment, trial, and sentencing, followed by a new trial in 2009–10. Let us note that in discussions of these events the emotional tone may vary widely, from “Serves him right! That’s how to deal with the filthy oligarchs!” to “Horrors! What are they doing to Russian business and our legal system?” In either case “Russian state power” wins: it has graphically demonstrated to everyone “who is master of the house” and what he can do—to anyone.9
It is also clear that rituals of intimidation require a special, highly developed apparatus of violence and coercion. The hypertrophied development in Russia of coercive structures (the armed forces; the police, gendarmerie, or militia; special services of various kinds) is a response to this requirement. These institutions are an important “unintended consequence” of “Russian state power” in terms of claims to rents and the widespread practice of violence and coercion as the basis for solving all conflicts and problems.

Is Russia Doomed to Alternating Cycles of Strength in “Russian State Power”?

Let us consider the advantages that a dynamic view of interactions among mental structures, ritual practices, and institutions offers over previous metaphorical, static, and ideal-typical concepts of “Russian state power.” Such a view gives rise to a language for deliberation and research concerning the conditions under which this phenomenon is reproduced and might be overcome—a language that can also be used for future programs of civic and political self-organization.

The strength of “Russian state power” is evident in the fact that despite crises and even disintegration, despite all attempts at liberalization, it restores itself anew in all its authoritarian glory. Will Russian politics be able to pull itself out of this cyclical rut, to acquire a new logic of historical development? There is and can be no categorical answer.

On the one hand, the multidimensionality and inertia of the inner foundations of “Russian state power” and of its cyclical dynamic are enormous, inasmuch as these foundations include self-reproducing and mutually supportive mental structures, institutions, and ritual practices. On the other hand, the macrosociological principles of historical dynamics reject fatalism. The social evolution of surrounding societies continues; international competition intensifies; intercultural ties expand; the self-isolation of societies becomes less and less feasible. Space for the crisis-free development of authoritarian regimes, including the current variant of “Russian state power,” narrows correspondingly. The crises of this kind of regime will become more frequent and more acute.

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. ¹⁰

Notes

1. Oleinik confirmed and fine-tuned these attributes in a sociological investigation: “The results of two series of interviews with state employees and experts were used for content analysis. Series A includes the transcripts of sixty-four semistructured open-ended interviews conducted in 2006–8 with experts and state employees occupying the posts of section head and department director at the regional and federal levels. Series B consists of the transcripts of forty-three unstructured open-ended interviews conducted in 2005–6 with experts, business people, and state employees occupying the posts of department director and deputy minister at the federal level” (2010, p. 82).

2. A comparative study of values using the methodology of Shalom Schwartz has shown that on the parameter of “Benevolence,” Russia occupies one of the last places among European countries, together with Slovakia, Romania, and the Russian-speaking residents of Estonia. The same applies to “Universalism” (acceptance of things that are foreign)—here Russia shares last place with Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Cyprus (Magun and Rudnev 2008).

3. For a detailed historical analysis of this feature, see Pivovarov 2006.

4. These ideas are developed in relation to Russia in Kirdina 2005, pp. 75–101; Bessonova 2006; Kordonskii 2008; and Rossiia i rossiiane 2008.

5. “Among the functions of the sacred state, one deserves special attention: a ‘real’ sacred state is regarded as an ‘equalizer’—that is, a force that stands against the processes of property differentiation that destroy the traditional village community. It is far from a coincidence that the Russian peasantry turned away from tsarism after the Stolypin reforms and followed the Bolsheviks” (Iakovenko 2009, p. 254).


7. This is formulated with the utmost precision in Levada 2006: “Dispersed and ineffective mass dissatisfaction in fact serves as a means of neutralizing and devaluting the potential for protest and, in a broader context, of justifying the established system of state tyranny and social helplessness. Discontented groups are compelled to appeal to the state authorities, which makes them even more dependent on the ruling bureaucracy.”

8. Gudkov makes the same point: “Under our conditions, public actions by officials have the deeply theatrical and demonstrative, almost ceremonial purpose of staging a ‘drama of paternalistic and total governance.’ The manifest (presented
publicly on television screens) actions of the country’s leadership have nothing to
do with the technology of governance or, correspondingly, with issues of efficiency,
expediency, political responsibility, and final effectiveness” (2009, p. 27).

9. “State power in Russia is an institution for preserving the whole, since it is
based not on representation of the diversity of social forms and social meanings
(group or corporate interests), but instead on disqualification of any Other in com-
parison with itself, on exclusion from public life of any alternative authorities and
sources of influence. Such a state power, properly speaking, is an embodiment of
violence—that is, subordination of all to the monopoly of authority in the hands of
those who hold power” (Gudkov 2009, p. 26).

10. “Russia, however ill-fated by its history, has had at least a version of de-
mocracy since 1991, so there should be some conditions, generally specifiable,
that would make it possible for Russian democracy to prosper” (Collins 1999,
pp. 111–12). On general conditions for a breakthrough to open public politics,
see Rozov 2008, pp. 74–89; on the general principles of mental dynamics and
the diversity of Russian habitus, see Rozov 2010a, pp. 7–21; on the imperatives
for change in the Russian mentality, see Rozov 2010b. In my new book, I give a
theoretical-historical analysis of Russian cycles, assess possibilities and work out
trajectories for a “breakthrough,” propose a strategy for a peaceful institutional
revolution, and substantiate priorities and goals for foreign policy in its geoeco-
nomic, geopolitical, and geocultural aspects (Rozov 2011).

References

Bessonova, O. 2006. Razdatochnaia ekonomika Rossii. Evoliutsiia cherez transfor-
matsiiu. Moscow: Rosspen.

CA: Stanford University Press.

Press.

kontseptsii.” Polis, no. 3.

povedeynego opyta. Moscow: Institut sotsiologii RAN, Institut Fonda “Ob-
shchestvennoe mnienie.”

obshchestvennogo mnienia: Dannye. Analiz. Diskussii, no. 2 (100).

In V poiskakh teorii rossiiskoi tsivilizatsii. Pamiati A.S. Akhiezera, comp. A.P.
Davydov. Moscow: Novyi khronograf.

Kirdina, S.G. 2005. “Teoriiia institutsional’nykh matrits (primer rossiiskogo insti-
tutsionalizma).” In Postsovetskii institutsionalizm, ed. R.M. Nureev and V.V.
Dement’ev. Donetsk: Kashtan.

Kliamkin, I.M. 2007. “Postmilitaristskoe gosudarstvo.” In Rossiiskoe gosudarstvo:
vchera, segodnia, zavtra. Moscow: Novoe izdatel’stvo.


