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American Lessons: On the Path Toward Russian "Progressivism"

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Russia needs its own Progressive Era. Let us be honest: many of the current problems of the Russian state and Russian governance were present in the United States prior to its "age of reforms," circa 1890-1930. Political machines distributing jobs, public services contracts, and other government favors operated in many American cities over a century ago just like they do in Russian cities today. Moscow's elaborate system of kickbacks for street cleaning can be compared directly to practices common in nineteenth-century American towns and cities. Vast overpayments in road construction in Russia and billions of rubles lost in energy pipelines and other infrastructural projects hearken back to the construction of antebellum U.S. canals. Cash-filled envelopes (or suitcases!) floating in the halls of today's State Duma were also a common occurrence in the 19th century U.S. Senate.

The Progressive Era was the United States' "big bang" in fighting corruption. A Russian "big bang" is arguably the only reasonable strategy for dealing with the current range of problems that are commonly considered under the umbrella of corruption.[1]

American success in eradicating the widespread governance problems of the 19th century is both a cause for optimism and a call for action. Granted, policy successes are not easy to transplant from one historical and cultural milieu to another (and the United States is not corruption-free), but does the U.S. Progressive Era have anything to offer in terms of its lessons and inspirations for Russia?

Scholars such as Richard Hofstadter, Gabriel Kolko, Robert Wiebe, and other historians, sociologists, and political scientists have advanced different interpretations of the sources and nature of the Progressive Era. Where most scholars agree is that the Progressive movement was propelled by the awakening of the middle class, especially

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[1] Bo Rothstein, "Anti-Corruption–A Big Bang Theory," QoG Working Paper Series No. 3 (Quality of Government Institute, Göteborg University), 2007.

segments of newer professional communities that, in coalition with big businessmen, sought to establish more rational and efficient government arrangements.

The recent protests in Moscow and Russia's other big cities demonstrate the emergence of a new political landscape in Russia, with the new middle class showing signs of awakening and mobilizing against pervasive corruption, a centralized political system, and an unaccountable government. Russian sociologist Mikhail Dmitriev, who predicted the growing discontent on the part of the middle class before these protests arose, has also argued recently that this anti-Putin and anti-government discontent has spread beyond the large cities (*The Economist*, April 7).

How to turn this growing discontent into effective political action? How to prevent the positive energy driving these recent protests from dissipating into thin air? What are the requirements for effective, grassroots-based, long-lasting political action?

Usually scholars look into institutional changes associated with such reform movements, advising policy makers to replicate certain institutions that are considered crucial to the success of these reform movements and that signify the materialization of the goals and aspirations driving these reform movements. The anti-trust legislation, the city-manager system, labor protection laws, and women's suffrage are among the central institutional changes associated with the Progressive Era in the United States. Focusing on these institutional changes, however, would not produce much added value in present-day Russia. After all, most of these institutions and laws have already been adopted by the Russian state. Russia has its own anti-trust agency and anti-corruption laws; it has introduced its own city management system for governing its cities and municipalities; and it has its own labor unions and labor protection laws. The problem is not the absence of these institutions, but rather that these institutions do not work as intended. Bulgakov's classic quote, "the ruin starts in people's heads" (*razrukha ne v klozetah, ona v golovakh*) is probably pertinent here and supported by one of the forgotten lessons from the Progressive Era—the importance of ideational innovation for maintaining and realizing the fruits of popular mobilization.

Among its other lessons, the Progressive Era shows that institutional innovations are prefaced by shifting frames of reference and changing understandings regarding the key issues confronting society. A good example is the passing of anti-trust legislation, which was based on a conceptual innovation that "reframed the trust problem by shifting the parameters of debate from individualism (laissez-faire policy) versus paternalism (direct government involvement), to conservatism (protect the status quo) versus radicalism (unrest and spreading capitalism)."[2] Unhappy with conservatism and fearing radicalism, Richard Ely, one Progressive leader, advocated for a middle ground that included a role for both the market and government, thus departing from a formerly dominant frame based on opposition between the two.

Even more pertinently, the Progressive Era involved a shift from the "Gospel of wealth" embodied in the philosophy of Social Darwinism to the Social Gospel. The first

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[2] W. Lawrence Neuman, "Negotiated Meanings and State Transformation: The Trust Issue in the Progressive Era," *Social Problems* 45 (3), 1998, 323.

decade of the 20th century saw a rapid spread of ideas advocated by leaders of the Social Gospel movement, who reinterpreted the Bible to argue that the Kingdom of God should be built on earth and that individual salvation is impossible in the context of social suffering. Theologians of the Social Gospel such as Walter Rauschenbusch called for individual responsibility toward such social problems as poverty and inequality and advocated social reform. This newly popularized message of ethical reawakening and socially-oriented action stood in contrast to ideas promulgated earlier in the 1880s and 1890s defending individualism and the "survival of the fittest," and making inequality an inevitable and even "normal" condition.

Progressivism encompassed a range of issues that also included municipal reform, labor conditions, food safety, social welfare, and electoral reform. But what enabled changes to occur in these different areas was the Progressive spirit—a public consciousness that the United States was in crisis and that "something needed to be done." A sense of crisis was cultivated by a new kind of muckraking journalism, which exposed corruption, abuses of power, and the aggressive monopolization of various sectors in the economy.

Many of the "social ingredients" of the Progressive Era are now present in Russia. There is the muckraking work of blogger Alexei Navalny, which places the issue of government corruption at center stage and is supported by the work of others, particularly journalists like Marina Litvinovich and Yulia Latynina, as well as thousands of people on the streets who used their cameras and phones to document corruption (whether vote falsification during elections or police abuse during protests) and upload it to social media sites. There is a middle class emerging as a result of the economic growth of the 2000s that is unhappy with the direction Russia has taken in the last decade or more. And there are outlines of a new rhetorical frame emerging as an alternative to the dominant frame developed in the 2000s that propped up the political regime built by Putin and his supporters.

That dominant frame was a double-edged sword. One edge was directed against the "tumultuous 1990s" (*likhie 90-e*), entailing a promise of order and stability. Another was directed against the "enemy at the gate," the West and particularly the United States, and entailed a promise of Russia rising from its knees. This was a frame aimed at consolidating a community struggling to define its identity and find a new point of reference and new system of values to succeed in a new world. The broader system of values in the 2000s, however, continued and even expanded on the set of values that existed in the 1990s, a period of nascent capitalism in Russia. It was then that the value system began focusing on "enriching yourselves," as acquiring money was considered the ultimate measure of social success. Putin's 2000s did nothing to change this frame of reference. To the contrary, his era, though filled with nationalist *ressentiment*, further solidified and strengthened the pull of individualistic materialism, as state agents began joining the "wild dance around the golden calf." If there was any innovation in that system of values, it was a further demoralization of the public space and propagation of cynicism. As expressed by writer Andrei Arkhangelskii, the ideology underlying Putin's Russia has been that "there is no truth, only prices for oil and gas." Those who did not

subscribe to that ideology, especially among the youth, found escape in various radical interpretations of religion or nationalism, or they simply retreated into their virtual spaces.

The biggest promise of the recent protests is related to their Progressive spirit and the extent to which these protests represent a reaction to the officially sanctioned cynicism that characterized Russia in the 2000s. The demand for a new system of values, the rediscovery of a non-materialist public spirit, and the ideas of public service and civic duty are crucial first steps required for articulating a new agenda, a new era, for Russia. As Irina Prokhorova put it concisely explaining the march into politics of her brother (and oligarch) Mikhail Prokhorov, "a successful individual is a citizen and a patriot." The widespread understanding that a talented businessman cannot share in the public spirit is wrong.

Indeed, the social basis of protest driven by well-to-do young professionals and representatives of what is frequently referred to as "the creative class" reflects the readiness of this new affluent middle class to move beyond narrowly defined materialist concerns and embrace a new rhetoric driven by ideas of dignity, authenticity, and real patriotism—as opposed to the Kremlin-organized "*Nashi* patriotism" promoted in the 2000s. It is not surprising that this movement toward a new system of values is accompanied by growing public receptivity to members of the creative class—writers like Boris Akunin, Zakhar Prilepin, and Lyudmila Ulitskaya; singers like Yuri Shevchuk; literary professionals like Irina Prokhorova; and actors like Chulpan Khamatova. The growing influence of the creative class is a sign of the emerging demand for a new direction and new frames of reference by which to live in Russia.

There should be no shortage of ideas in a country with such a vast cultural legacy and rich intellectual ground for defining and redefining the spiritual coordinates of the nation. What should be kept in mind, however, is that a belief in the "public interest" and "common good" was what united virtually all Progressives in the United States. The future of Russia's Progressive movement is dependent on the ability of Russia's creative class to further articulate and propagate a renaissance in public spirit, as well as the course of the Russian economy and its ability to strengthen and enlarge a middle class open to and mobilizing for Progressive change.

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