

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

“High modernism” and its limits – Assessing state incapacity in Putin's Russia, 2000–2008

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
High-modernism
State capacity
Civil service reform
Pension reform
Housing sector reform

ABSTRACT

This paper uses an analytical framework developed from James C. Scott's concept of state-sponsored “high modernism” to understand the scope and limits of Putin's attempt to reconfigure state-society relations under the guise of “managed democracy.” It argues that Kremlin, under Putin's first two presidential terms (2000–2008), attempted to treat society as a reified object separate from the state and as an object of management. The paper analyzes the Russian state's weak regulatory capacity that coexists with its relatively strong coercive and extractive capacities. It is argued that, in spite of accessing vast resources from the energy sector, the state under Putin's presidency was unable to successfully carry out civil service reform or implement critical reforms in the pension and housing sectors. The analytical framework used offers insights into the limits of authoritarian state-crafting and modernization in contemporary Russia.

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This paper uses an analytical framework developed from James C. Scott's concept of state-sponsored “high modernism” to understand the scope and limits of Putin's attempt to reconfigure state-society relations under the guise of “managed democracy.” It argues that Kremlin, under Putin's first two presidential terms (2000–2008), attempted to treat society as a reified object separate from the state and as an object of management. Such attempts of social engineering assume that a unitary planning authority can supplant multiple sources of innovation and change. Putin's high modernist ideology devalues politics, imagines a prostate civil society, and fails to build broad and sustainable pro-reform coalitions in support of much needed structural reforms. The paper analyzes the Russian state's weak regulatory capacity that coexists with its relatively strong coercive and extractive capacities. It is argued that, in spite of accessing vast resources from the energy sector, the state under Putin's presidency was unable to successfully carry out civil service reform or implement critical reforms in the pension and housing sectors. The analytical framework used offers insights into the limits of authoritarian state-crafting and modernization in contemporary Russia. Revisiting Putin's first two terms is useful not just for assessing the mode of power and rule that continues to afflict Russia today, but to better gauge the sources and nature of state incapacity that undermine the country's “modernization” project.

Putin's centralization and state-building efforts have been well documented in the literature (Hashim, 2005; Hyde, 2001; Reddaway, 2001; Rutland, 2000; Sharlet, 2003). During his first two terms as President, Putin reigned in the regional governors by restoring the vertical chain of command (*vertikal*) and by “legal harmonization” to reassert the center's supremacy over the periphery. The Kremlin under Putin also made the party system easier to manipulate through a November 2004 bill

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2017.06.005>

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Please cite this article in press as: Hashim, S.M., “High modernism” and its limits – Assessing state incapacity in Putin's Russia, 2000–2008, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2017.06.005>

on parties and electoral reforms that raised the threshold to 7 percent, limiting the number of parties that are electorally viable. He also abolished the single-member district provision to get elected to parliament.¹ Kremlin also centralized power away from regional courts, elections commissions and organs of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. Putin selectively targeted oligarchs with political ambitions, using his tax police and other security service apparatus. The fate of oligarchs like Beresovskii, Gusinkii and Khodorkovski are well-known. An array of presidential decrees in July 2004 further emboldened the “Power Ministries” without any consultation with the Duma. The KGB successor organization, namely the Federal Security Service (FSB), was elevated to a Ministry. Putin’s goal was to emancipate the state from “capture” by vested interests, while increasing the state’s capacity to manipulate a more “legible” society in order to modernize Russia from atop. To this end, Kremlin launched its Civic Forum initiative in 2001, when it convened a meeting with 5000 participants representing 350,000 NGOs. Politically inconvenient NGOs were already being harassed by tax authorities.

Additionally, all national organizations were required to re-register with federal authorities. In 2000, it was reported that less than half of them were allowed to do so (Mendelson, 2000). The federal authorities clearly stepped up the monitoring and control of civil society organizations. In July 2005, Kremlin created the Public Chamber as a “forum for broad dialog.” Kremlin controlled the composition of the body by directly appointing a third of its members. Although another third were nominated by civil society groups, it was clear that the Chamber was a surrogate organization for the Kremlin to monitor and fund civil society groups. The aforementioned two-thirds selected the final one-third to complete the 126 member Chamber (Evans, 2008). The Duma also came under control of the Kremlin as United Russia became the hegemonic party. The aforementioned measures were designed to strengthen the state to fulfill Putin’s agenda of manipulating a prostrate society to deliver Russia into a form of authoritarian modernity that would restore Russia’s great power status (*derzhavnost*) and state-ness (*gosudarstvennost*).

This paper is structured as follows. The next section presents Scott’s concept of “high modernism” as an apt analytical framework to understand Putin’s state and its political project of altering state-society relations under the guise of delivering order and prosperity, managed from the center. The subsequent section evaluates the civil service reform cycle during the 2000–2008 period. This helps us understand how Putin’s high modernist agenda is undermined by weak state capacity. As previously mentioned, high modernist goals of manipulating society with the goal of delivering order and prosperity requires an effective state administrative capacity. Putin’s inability to reform the civil service has sustained, if not promoted, bureaucratic morass and incompetence. The lack of effective organs of public administration, in turn, has limited the high modernist state’s capacity to promote its agenda mentioned above. The next two sections look at pension and housing reforms during Putin’s first two terms in order to elucidate the state’s incapacity in implementing high priority micro-structural reforms that are meant to improve material conditions for the Russian citizens and to harness popular support and legitimacy for the regime. Housing and pension reforms are crucial elements of social reforms that are needed to promote Putin’s high modernist agenda of controlled societal change through meticulous state intervention. The concluding section revisits James Scott’s understanding of high modernism as an analytical framework that helps us understand some of the limits of authoritarian state-crafting and modernization in contemporary Russia.

1. Scott’s high modernism as an analytical framework to understand Putin’s Russia

For Scott, high modernist states try to make societies legible, since without a metric of society, state interventions are most likely to fail. Legible states are “manipulable from above and from the center” (Scott, 1998, p. 2). Putin’s centralization measures certainly speak of a center’s penchant for manipulating the sociopolitical and economic system in Russia that experienced a high degree of “illegibility” during the first decade of post-communist transition. Indeed, the 1990s were marked by macroeconomic collapse and criminalization of the economy, administrative impotence and institutional chaos, fragmentation and corruption of political society, weakening of a nascent civil society, and a demographic crisis in the face of Russia’s loss of great power status. Putin’s agenda has been to “bring the state back in” charge of the Russian transition process. In a relatively short period of time, Putin’s “revolution from above” helped consolidate power in the Kremlin.

Scott presents high modernism as a “deeply authoritarian view,” where planned social order is deemed better than the “accidental, irrational deposit of historic practice.” In a sense, high modernist ideology tends to “devalue or banish politics,” as it privileges those “who have scientific knowledge to discern and create their superior social order as fit to rule in the new age” (Scott, 1998, p.94). For these rulers, political interests only hinder and frustrate the social solutions designed from above and the center (Scott, 1998). For Scott, high modernist states attempt to impose a “fixed social order” to muzzle the “plasticity and autonomy of existing social life,” and this “order” strives to replace the “multiple sources of invention and change” (Scott, 2006, p.7). Such “hegemonic planning mentality excludes the necessary role of local knowledge and know-how” (Scott, 1998, p.6). The goal is to create a “thoroughly legible society” through “uniformity of codes, identities, statistics, regulations and measures” thus eliminating “local monopolies of information” that may make society less pliable (Scott, 1998, p.78). For high modernists, the illegibility of society serves as a resource for political autonomy (Scott, 1998).

Scott reminds us that the high modernist development fiascos are not confined to Lesser Developed Countries and socialist experiments such as Mao’s Great Leap Forward and Stalin’s collectivization drive (Scott, 1998). High modernist state interventions were tried out, without the desired effects, in settings as distinct as the New Deal project Tennessee Valley

¹ Russia, under Putin’s directive, has reverted back to the mixed electoral system from the Duma 2015 election cycle.

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