The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

China, Russia Will Be Forced to Democratize

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

November 01, 2010



The two largest and most powerful autocracies in the world — China and Russia — have experienced similar pressures over the past years as their civil societies gain in strength and influence. Over the next five to 10 years, as millions of Russians and Chinese come to realize that they are full-fledged citizens of their countries with basic constitutional rights — and not merely submissive subjects of authoritarian bureaucratic machines — there is a good chance they will demand their rightful role in shaping civil society and government policies.

The Internet has become the driving force behind these pressures. With an audience snowballing in size at breakneck speed, the Internet has already become a serious alternative to the sophisticated, huge government propaganda machines in both nations.

In Russia, thanks to YouTube and bloggers, every large scandal and abuse of power by the authorities quickly gains notoriety on the Internet and becomes a subject of public discussion — even when state-controlled television is completely silent on the subject. For example,

thanks to the Internet, the sharp exchange between rock musician Yury Shevchuk and Putin became a national event. Similarly, when police Major Denis Yevsyukov went on a shooting spree in a Moscow supermarket, it was the incensed public reaction on the Internet that helped push President Dmitry Medvedev to initiate reforms in the Interior Ministry.

In China, all attempts by the authorities to control the Internet seem to have the opposite result. Millions of Internet users are increasingly active in discussing problems of their daily lives as well as subjects related to China's development. The authorities can no longer ignore the influence of public opinion and people's reaction to various events reported on the Internet. Last year, a photograph posted on the Internet of a public official wearing an expensive watch and with expensive cigarettes on his table created a huge controversy. The authorities reacted to the public uproar by opening a corruption investigation into the government official. (Unfortunately, similar attempts in Russia — particularly among top bureaucrats in Moscow City Hall — were unsuccessful.)

China's most popular young writer, Han Han, 28, has become the sensation of the year. He became famous in China the early 2000s following the publication of his best-selling first book, "Triple Door," which describes the daily life of the Chinese. The novel was first posted on the Internet and then published in book form. With more than 2 million copies in print, "Triple Door" is the best-selling Chinese book in the past 20 years. Today, Han Han's Twitter address and blog enjoy unbelievable popularity. When he recently posted the single Chinese character "Wei" ("Hello"), there were more than 400 million hits.

Russia, with its greater proximity to Europe and longer history of attempts at democratic reform, continues to be several modest steps ahead of China in terms of developing at least the beginnings of a civil society. After serious backtracking and apathy in the late 2000s, Russian civil society is now making visible progress. We have seen an increase in the number of social movements and groups, such as those trying to protect the environment or the country's historical heritage and those fighting against abuses of power and corruption among the authorities.

The deciding factor of change in both countries will be social development in their large cities. That is where the new middle class is appearing and gaining ground, where Internet usage is growing and civil initiatives are springing up and accumulating experience.

The visionary chief architect of Chinese reforms, Deng Xiaoping, clearly foresaw such a development. He was the one who predicted two decades ago that the success of the "openness policy" in the economy would not ultimately endure without a democratic transition to openness and reforms in political institutions. He suggested that those changes should take place by the end of the 20th century. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened.

China's Communist leaders are far more competent in economic and political matters than their Russian counterparts. Although they are aware of the growing autonomy and increasing influence of society, they remain reluctant to introduce substantial political reforms for fear of destabilizing the state and the economy and ultimately losing the grasp on power that the Communist Party has held since 1949. In this regard, they recall the words of the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who said, "Water, though soft, can break a dam of solid rock no matter what steps are taken to reinforce it."

Political changes in both countries are inevitable, regardless of how much China's Politburo and the Kremlin try to resist attempts to implement reforms to their political institutions. The people's growing intolerance with rampant government corruption and deepening social stratification has slowly but surely shifted the balance of power away from the state and toward society.

This whole process is complemented and reinforced by an active reinterpretation of history. In China, a new movie by director Zhang Yimou, "Under the Hawthorn Tree," about the wrenching and tragic history of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, has already become a national hit. It tells the story of a young man from the family of a Communist Party functionary who falls in love with a young woman whose father has been arrested as a member of the "right-wing opposition." Yimou's film is full of compassion for its heroes, people who have been victimized by the state in the name of its utopian dream. Humanistic and uplifting, the movie accurately portrays the oppressive atmosphere in China in the early 1970s and has become a major event in the country's cultural and social life — two areas that will play a crucial role in shaping the future development of the most populous country and the world's second-largest economy.

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