The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia, the Catalyst of Change (Op-Ed)

Today's political turbulence in the West and Russia's role in it may be reminiscent of the events that took place almost 40 years ago.

By Maxim Trudolyubov

February 01, 2017



Jeff Chiu / AP

Regardless of what one can prove in the complicated story of Russian hackers meddling in the institutions of the United States, there is still a story to tell about Russian influence on the West. It has little to do with covert operations or propaganda. Russia seems able to make its mark in the world just by going through its own political cycle.

Grigory Golosov, one of Russia's leading political scientists, noted recently that Russia sometimes acts as a provocateur or a catalyst
. More than once Russia's political challenge
has prompted other societies and political leaders to respond and develop reactive
political strategies.

The Russian revolution, which happened 100 years ago, was one such contagious event. Seen by some as a historic breakthrough and by some as a dangerous precedent, it proved one of the most fateful political turning points of the twentieth century. Some tried to imitate the revolution, some created equally totalitarian structures to counter it. In the end, it was the Soviet Union's embrace of the socialist state that challenged the rest of the world to respond and create the modern welfare state, "the bedrock of the world in which we live, a bedrock that is coming apart everywhere," the historian Stephen Kotkin writes in his book, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization.*

It is important to keep in mind that the reality of the Soviet state most Soviet citizens experienced was a matter of indifference to those Western politicians who championed their welfare policies. Center-left forces had to act in a world where the USSR was perceived by many as a successful socialist project. Western politicians had to offer their voters an alternative.

The next time the Soviet project again presented its Western counterparts with an existential challenge was the decade of the 1970s. The Soviet Union was at the peak of its form back then. A space and military superpower impervious to foreign pressure, it commanded a vast empire of socialist allies, stoked anti-Western sentiment all over the world, crushed dissent at home and resistance to its rule in Eastern and Central Europe.

Related article: Trump and Putin: More Than a 'Reset'

Today's political turbulence in the West may be reminiscent of the events that took place almost 40 years ago. "What we are seeing today reminds me of the turbulence of the late 1970s, albeit in a mitigated form," Golosov writes. Quoting former German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier's recent opinion piece (the "old world of the 20th century is over for good"), Golosov points out that politicians and pundits of the late 1970s were equally pessimistic.

"Then as now, western politicians had run out of economic ideas. The oil crisis of 1973, which unleashed 'stagflation', was their equivalent of the financial crisis of 2008," Simon Kuper, a columnist with the *Financial Times,* wrote last year.

The U.S. had just had its Watergate crisis. Britain, under the leadership of the Labour prime minister James Callaghan, was approaching its Winter of Discontent (1978–79), complete with mass strikes and protests. West Germany's chancellor Willy Brandt had resigned when his deputy was exposed as a spy. President Jimmy Carter, a benign and well-intentioned leader, had too much on his plate: soaring gasoline prices, inflation, unemployment, and a series of grave foreign policy crises. The shah of Iran, the preeminent pro-Western leader of the Middle East, was overthrown in 1979. In November of that same year American citizens were taken hostage in Tehran, and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan a month later.

Democracy was the answer, writes Golosov. By changing the agenda and bringing in new leaders the U.S. and many European countries were able to fix their political systems and restart their economies (creating more problems for the future in the process). The Soviet Union barely outlived the 1980s, while its former allies democratized and the West prospered. Would it all be possible without the USSR serving as a fearful other in the first place?

Russia's influence in today's Europe and the U.S. is of similar nature: a catalyst rather than a leader or a challenger. Vladimir Putin has been solving his domestic problems the way he sees fit. Faced by a breakaway Caucasian region, by governors building independent fiefdoms all over the country, by rampant crime and corruption, he consolidated Moscow's central power. Rather than unleashing a Soviet-style terror, for which he had neither enough force nor willingness, he effectively negotiated a relative domestic peace, in which all the vested interests were pressured to compromise between their own private well-being and that of Moscow. Feeling threatened by perceived attempts at regime change, Moscow then went on to consolidate power even further by showing the world its military teeth.

Related article: Putin and Trump Want to Team Up, but That's Not Going to Be Easy

The process was initiated out of dire necessity and was not pretty. It was about power, not about Russian society, which had little say in what was happening. It was by definition not about values of any kind but about down-to-earth realism in both domestic and foreign arenas. In fact, the very notion of values has become a bogeyman for the Kremlin. The Kremlin sees values other than its own power interest as false flags used by others to hide their true aggressive intentions.

This arch-realist stance has never been meant to be an ideology because it was post-ideological in nature. And yet it has acquired a power of a quasi-ideology. Fringe political forces aggrieved by inequality and centrist politicians' complacency started to come out of their niches, looking to Moscow as a beacon of sorts.

As always, the reality of the Russian regime as we Russians see and experience it is a matter of indifference to those in the West who champion nationalist (U.S. President Donald Trump) or anti-elite agendas (various European right-wing and left-wing parties). It is more about what people read into Russia's perceived strength than about what Russia's strengths really are. Once again we are at a historical turning point when Russia may prove to be a catalyst of change in other countries. Russia's own political dynamic, meanwhile, is a completely different story.

Maxim Trudolyubov is a senior fellow with the Kennan Institute. This Op-Ed originally appeared on The Russian File: a Kennan Institute Blog*.*

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/02/01/russia-the-catalyst-of-change-a56997