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Research article

From Conservative to Technological Modernization in Russia: Discourse and Policy

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Abstract

The paper raises the question of how to approach recent non-Western modernization programs, taking the Russian "conservative modernization" program and its transformation through the concept of the state-civilization as a case study. Non-Western modernization is based on the idea that technology, on the one hand, and political institutions and values, on the other, are separable, thereby replacing the latter with another civilizational foundation. This work examines the fusion of technological development and non-Western civilizational foundations as the socio-technical imaginary of "technological modernization." The research question is how this imaginary is constructed and justified, and what it means in practice. The paper consists of three sections: Section 1 offers reflections on the concept of modernization; Section 2 situates the Russian conservative modernization program; and Section 3 examines the concept of Russian state-civilization in the context of "technological modernization." The analysis of the conservative modernization program relies on a normative-descriptive approach to the concept of modernization proposed in the paper. The normative component includes the imagined vision of a "normalized future" and can also be interpreted as a sociotechnical imaginary, since it fuses the vision of the good life with the technological future. The descriptive component refers to the vision of the current situation and the recipe for reaching the desired future. Examining the conservative modernization agenda reveals its ambiguity, which arises from the merging of liberal, conservative, and technocratic rhetoric. Analyzing the concept of state-civilization through the lens of technological development reveals how the state-civilization framework transforms coproduction, as Sheila Jasanoff defines it, by de-universalizing and detaching Western governance forms from Western technology, and by insisting that they are civilizational choices of a particular civilization, imposed globally as if they were universal. The article concludes with examples of how the socio-technical imaginary of "technological modernization" operates in practice.

Keywords: Modernization; Liberalism; Conservatism; Social engineering; De-Westernization

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Научная статья

От консервативной к технологической модернизации в России: Дискурс и политика

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Аннотация
В статье ставится вопрос о том, как подходить к недавним незападным программам модернизации, рассматривая российскую программу "консервативной модернизации" и ее трансформацию через концепцию государства-цивилизации в качестве примера. Незападная модернизация основана на идее о том, что технологии, с одной стороны, и политические институты и ценности, с другой, отделимы друг от друга, тем самым заменяя последние другой цивилизационной основой. В данной работе рассматривается слияние технологического развития и незападных цивилизационных основ как социально-техническое представление о "технологической модернизации". Вопрос исследования заключается в том, как это представление конструируется и обосновывается, и что оно означает на практике. Статья состоит из трех разделов: в разделе 1 представлены размышления о концепции модернизации; в разделе 2 представлена российская консервативная программа модернизации.; а в разделе 3 рассматривается концепция российского государства-цивилизации в контексте "технологической модернизации". Анализ консервативной программы модернизации основан на нормативно-описательном подходе к концепции модернизации, предложенном в статье. Нормативный компонент включает в себя воображаемое видение "нормализованного будущего" и также может быть интерпретирован как социотехническое воображение, поскольку он объединяет представление о хорошей жизни с технологическим будущим. Описательный компонент относится к видению текущей ситуации и рецепту достижения желаемого будущего. Изучение консервативной программы модернизации выявляет ее неоднозначность, которая возникает из-за слияния либеральной, консервативной и технократической риторики. Анализ концепции государства-цивилизации через призму технологического развития показывает, как структура государства-цивилизации трансформирует совместное производство, по определению Шейлы Ясанофф, путем деуниверсализации и отделения западных форм управления от западных технологий и настаивания на том, что они являются цивилизационным выбором конкретной цивилизации, навязываемым глобально, как будто они были универсальными. Статья завершается примерами того, как социально-техническое представление о "технологической модернизации" работает на практике.

Ключевые слова: Модернизация; Либерализм; Консерватизм; Социальная инженерия; Девестернизация

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INTRODUCTION

The concepts of modernity and modernization are closely linked to European historical development. Initially, they captured the rapid transformations of European societies during the scientific, industrial, and political revolutions, which changed everything: the way of production, consumption, and living; the way of doing politics; social structure; and human consciousness, as grasped through the notion of "modern man" (Inkeles, 1969). Of course, theories of modernity and modernization are closely intertwined: while theories of modernity, including those of Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Talcott Parsons, Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Antony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and Jean-François Lyotard, sought to reflect on the transformation of Western societies and the internal contradictions of the modern project, theories of modernization aimed to find a "recipe" for non-Western countries to achieve economic growth and social progress. Between the mid-1950s and 1960s, American authors such as Daniel Lerner, Seymour M. Lipset, Neil Smelser, Walt Rostow, David McClelland, Gabriel Almond, and Sydney Verba, formulated the main provisions of modernization theory, against a background of decolonization, the confrontation with the Soviet Union and communist ideology, and the search for new markets for US commodities (Latham, 2000).

The core of these provisions was the "modernization hypothesis," which focused on the empirical mechanisms of modernization. It argued for a causal link between technological and economic development and democratization. This assumption engendered a vast number of empirical studies on the correlation between economic development and democratization (Wucherpfennig & Deutsch, 2009). Although the nature of this correlation has remained unclear, the modernization hypothesis served as an ideological framework that provided the 'scientific' basis for American foreign policy until the late 1990s (Latham, 2000). In fact, the modernization hypothesis was based on the Marxist assumption of the key role of technology and economy in social development, supplemented by a non-Marxist vision of political institutions. It promoted the idea that industrialization and technological innovation would necessarily lead to the replacement of traditional culture with modern rational and secular values, and to the development of democratic political systems and institutions. The constellation of institutions inherent in Western countries, particularly English-speaking Protestant countries, was treated as a normative model, and the belief developed that success in social and economic development could be achieved by exporting the structural conditions of these societies to other countries (Sachsenmaier, 2002).

By the late 1960s, the validity of the core assumptions of modernization theory had been called into question, including a strict opposition between "modern" and "traditional;" the expectations that traditional values and social structures would be replaced; the concepts of growth and progress; and the focus on endogenous factors of development, to name but a few (Tipps, 1973; Knöbl, 2017). In the 1970s, modernization theory finally lost its momentum and relevance, mainly because it no longer fit the context of the economic and political crises that began to unfold in Western countries in the late 1960s (Gilman, 2007).

A new wave of critical reflections on modernity and modernization emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, driven by the transformation of Western societies and the end of the communist project. By the early 1980s, Western societies were experiencing deindustrialization, globalization, technological acceleration, environmental crises, individualization, and the collapse of stable class structures (Gilman, 2007). Instead of greater rationality and stability, modernity, as it turned out in the 1980s, has been producing instability, uncertainty, complexity, and new risks. This triggered a wave of theories of "new modernity," such as reflexive modernity, second modernity, liquid modernity, risk society, and postmodernity, which sought to rethink modernity from within. Interestingly, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc seemed to confirm the key assumptions of the modernization hypothesis, leading to its partial revival–parallel to the reconsideration of modernity.

In the 2000s, the theory of multiple modernities was explicitly formulated (Eisenstadt, 2000), marking the next step in rethinking. In recent decades, however, alternative non-Western modernization programs have begun to emerge, starting with Russia's "conservative modernization" launched in 2009. Other countries, including India, China, Brazil, and South Africa, have followed suit, launching their own programs with a strong focus on economic and technological development. In doing so, they have seemingly replaced Western liberal values and political ideals with their own visions of proper social order. These programs transformed the concept of modernization by essentially refusing to follow the "West" further in terms of social and political order. They definitely put an end to the expectations of the overall transition to liberal democracy, formulated by the modernization hypothesis. Liberalism is losing its persuasive power, which has been reflected in the rise of right-wing populism across the globe and a new wave of autocratization." Democracy Report from 2025 laments that "the GDP-weighted level of democracy is far below the 1974-year-level, at its lowest in over 50 years" (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2025, p. 10).

Trump's return to power in 2025 has significantly amplified anti-liberal trends in the U.S. and around the world, as well as the crisis of the rule-based liberal international order. At the same time, Trump launched a program he considers an initiative to reindustrialize the USA and "make it great again," as well as an initiative to accelerate the development of digital technology, also referred to as "modernization." Therefore, the problem I address in this paper is not merely the rejection of political liberalism but the combination of this trend with technological acceleration. Remarkably, while the modernization hypothesis posited a causal connection between economic development and democratization, emphasizing greater equality in the distribution of wealth as the necessary precondition for democracy (Shcherbak, 2018), the recent modernization programs correlate technological development with the "great power" status. Already in his inaugural speech, Trump interlaces technological development with the vision of the U.S. as "the greatest, most powerful, most respected nation on earth" (Trump, 2025a). But this connection is especially evident in his speech on the signing of the AI Action Plan on July 23, 2025:

> We mastered the Industrial Age, we created the Digital Age, and now we are leading the world into the golden age, indeed, the golden age of America… It will

> be run on American technology, improved by American artificial intelligence. And it will make America richer, stronger, greater, freer, and more powerful than ever before (Trump, 2025b).

For Vladimir Putin, the link between Russia as a great power and its technological advancement plays a no less essential role, starting with his programmatic article *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*:

> Russia was and will remain a great power. It is preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic and cultural existence… But Russian mentality should be expanded by new ideas. In the present world, *the might of a country as a great power is manifested more in its ability to be the leader in creating and using advanced technologies* [cursive mine – S.S.], ensuring a high level of people's wellbeing, reliably protecting its security and upholding its national interests in the international arena, than in its military strength. (Putin, 1999)

The vision of Russia as a great power in a multipolar world has been playing a major role in the Russian president's foreign policy discourse, closely entangled with security and sovereignty issues (Tsygankov, 2016; Frear & Mazepus, 2020). "Great power" is used in international relations (IR) and is a relational concept that refers to a state's standing, defined by its position in the hierarchy of other states and by external recognition. In Russian political discourse, "great power" overlaps with the concept of civilization (or a state-civilization), which gained prominence especially after the 2012 presidential election. In 2022, Putin used both terms separated by a comma: "Russia is a great thousand-year-old power, a whole civilization…" (President of the Russian Federation, 2022). In contrast to a great power, a state-civilization is an ontological concept that defines status from within, through a unique civilizational identity that does not require external recognition and cannot be measured by comparison. Put simply, by defining itself as a state-civilization, Russia claims to be a great power, regardless of what others think. Thus, state-civilization develops and bolsters the concept of great powers, shifting the issue of sovereignty to the existential level (Tsygankov, 2016), which is essential to the topic of modernization and technological development.

I am particularly interested in understanding how a state-civilization operates in domestic political discourse, namely as part of a complex sociotechnical imaginary. Cornelius Castoriadis (1975/1998) introduced the concept of the "social imaginary" as a collective horizon of meaning that is neither an ideology, nor a fantasy, nor merely a cognitive construct or description of reality – it is constitutive of social reality. Charles Taylor (2004) developed this into the concept of "modern social imaginaries" as shared images, expectations, and narratives about social existence that are constitutive for modern societies. Sheila Jasanoff translated this into the STS register, linking together material, moral, and social landscapes: "Imaginaries encode not only visions of what is attainable through science and technology but also of how life ought, or ought not, to be lived; in this respect they express a society's shared understandings of good and evil (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4). Put differently, sociotechnical imaginaries encode visions of a desirable future, referring to collective beliefs about how society functions.

The concept of great power can be considered as an imaginary in Jasanoff's sense, since it presupposes technological advancement as its sine qua non. However, I would sooner shift the focus and view this imaginary through the lens of technological development rather than politics. In the political context, technology functions as a means, an instrument for achieving political purposes – greatness and power. Focusing on technological development prompts us to ask about the normative horizon in which it is embedded. Therefore, I frame the issue in terms of "modernization," thereby raising the question: what vision of the future does technological development rely on, if it is not linked to the emancipatory political ideals of modernity? I will label the sociotechnical imaginary that fuses great power and technological development as "*technological modernization*." This term is widely used in industry to describe the process of introducing new technologies across economic sectors to increase productivity and competitiveness. I will try to demonstrate why this title may be appropriate even when it comes to society as a whole and, in the final section, provide the rationale for this terminological trick. Otherwise, Section 1 offers reflections on the concept of modernization; Section 2 provides a case study of the Russian conservative modernization program; and Section 3 considers the concept of state-civilization Russia as an essential part of the complex sociotechnical imaginary "technological modernization."

MODERNIZATION AS A CONCEPT OF EXPECTATIONS: NORMATIVITY AND THE SEMANTICS OF TIME

The concept of modernization can be attributed to a set of specific historical concepts Reinhart Koselleck calls "concepts of expectations," which shape our horizon for the future. Koselleck coined the categorical couple, "space of experience" and "horizon of expectations" as meta-historical categories indicative of the temporality of human beings and, hence, of history. These two categories are inseparable and presuppose no alternatives: "No expectation without experience, no experience without expectation" (Koselleck, 2004, p. 257). The "horizon of expectation" is defined within the "space of experience," which determines which future possibilities are perceived as feasible and contributes to imagining the future. In modern times, however, a new horizon of expectations emerged due to the rapid pace of change driven by technoscience. It could not be grounded in the present space of experience but rather anticipates an undoubtedly improved, yet unknown, future. Koselleck analyses how this change is captured by the concept of progress, which grasps a cleavage emerging between the past and the future, that means the growing temporal gap between experience and expectations.

Göran Therborn aptly summarized how this semantics of time is regarded by different theorists as a hallmark of modernity:

> Modernity here will be defined culturally, as an epoch turned to the future, conceived as likely to be different from and possibly better than the present and the past. The contrast between the past and the future directs modernity's 'semantics of time' [Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologie des Risikos*], or constitutes its 'binary code'. The present is 'valid only by the potentialities of the future, as the

> matrix of the future' [Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*]. The coming of modernity, then, is tantamount to the discovery of the future, of an open, this-worldly future, that is. This discovery is empirically verifiable/falsifiable, with regard to notions of knowledge, of politics and of other social affairs, and of art, for example. As such it is tied in with the rise of the idea of progress and the cumulation of knowledge [David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain*], with the Enlightenment, the opening up of a mundane time horizon [Reinhart Kosellek, *Futures Past*] and the heralding of social evolution. It is manifested in the loss of the previous, and etymological, retrospective meanings of the political concepts of reform and revolution, which instead turn into keys to the future. (Therborn, 1995, p.4).

Although the concept of modernization falls under the same category and features the same semantics of time as "progress," it differs in one essential aspect. While "progress" implies the uncertainty of a future detached from the space of experience, "modernization" refers to the empirical image of already modernized societies as the embodiment of the future for others. In this sense, the concept of modernization is more of an engineering nature: while shaping the horizon of expectations, it contains not a vague anticipation of a utopian "improved future," but rather a tangible image and a blueprint. In this way, Western societies become a normative model, playing the role of the City of God incarnate on earth. Back in the 1970s, harsh critics of modernization theory pointed out that "the most important referents of the concept [of modernization] are normative, not empirical," so that "the functions of the concept are primarily ideological," although it is represented as a scientific one (Tipps, 1973, p. 222).

In quite another context, namely the question of what a "problem" is, Jan C. Schmidt explicated the notion of „descriptive-normative hybrids," related to the future-oriented horizon of time. "Modernization" is not tantamount to a "problem," but it can be considered from the same perspective, "as a relation of three elements, which encompass normative and descriptive dimensions": 1) the desired final or ultimate state, which describes what the future should look like; 2) a vision of the present situation, which is qualified as an unsatisfactory and problematic state of affairs; and 3) the steps that need to be taken to transform the present state into the future state (Schmidt, 2021, p. 81). The vision of the current situation and the recipe for reaching the desired future can be considered the descriptive component of the concept; the imagined vision of a "normalized future" is the normative component that provides criteria for assessing the current situation. This structural approach allows us to analyze more rigorously various modernization programs, both Western and non-Western, in comparative and contextual terms. While the normative component refers to sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015), which blend the vision of the good life with the technological future, the descriptive components capture the experience of those modernized. This approach appears more relevant to the current situation than the classical binary opposition between "modern" and "traditional" societies – not only because the opposition captures neither the complexity of the non-Western world nor the heterogeneity of the West. Analysis of "modernization" as a descriptive-normative hybrid makes visible and accessible both its normative component and its engineering approach to society. It echoes Schmuel

Eisenstadt's interpretation of modern fundamentalist movements as specifically modern, however reactionary they may appear, because they share modern semantic of time, as well as modern social engineering attitude drawn on "the conception of society as an object of active construction by human beings which can be remolded above all by future-oriented political action" (Eisenstadt, 1999, p. 42).

European and American intellectuals have spent many years cataloging the main traits of modern societies and seeking an encompassing definition of modernization. The key question they were supposed to answer was "What made the West different?" (Gilman, 2007, p. 76). As Jürgen Habermas (1987, p. 2) observed, the modernization theorists separated the concept of modernity from its origins as a description of a specific period of European history and "stylized it into a spatiotemporally neutral model for the process of social development in general." This resulted in constructing "the West" as a geopolitical imaginary that blended actual institutional transformations of Western societies over a specific historical period with an idealized image of "the West" as the authentic embodiment of the best promises of modernity. However, the model of the West reflected not reality but its own idealized vision – in the 1950s, it was "what postwar American liberals wished their countries to be" (Gilman, 2007, p. 3).

This model also shaped the perception of modernizing countries, for whom the imaginary construct of the "West" served as a normative exemplar. This is especially true of ex-communist countries, which found themselves after the collapse of the Soviet bloc in a gap between Soviet and Western modernity. In the public discussions of the 1990s, the expectations of "normalization" prevailed (Krastev & Holms, 2019), not least because, in the imagination of the future, the communist utopia was substituted by the tangible empirical image of the West as a model of normality. Imagining the future in terms of catch-up modernization became dominant. It was both a utopian and geopolitical construction that presupposed that the present of the West would be the future of the Rest, so that emulation of the normative model by imitation has become an imperative of modernization (Krastev & Holms, 2019, p.8). 1989 indeed became a turning point, since at that moment liberalism, due to disappointment in the communist project, became the only acceptable and unavoidable option for the future. Faith in liberalism replaced faith in communism.

However, the emphasis on imitation obscures another fundamental feature of the modernization concept: its engineering approach to society, as evidenced by the discrepancies between modernization discourse and policy. According to the modernization hypothesis, the most important expected outcome of the modernization process is liberal democracy, which embodies the idea of autonomy and the expansion of personal and institutional freedom. However, the path to realizing this ideal involved increasingly authoritarian practices to launch economic reforms and technological development. Nils Gilman summarized his study of American modernization theory as follows:

> The modernization theorists believed that bureaucracies, technical experts, and social engineers of various stripes should impose economic and political order on cities, nations, and the world… Technocracy rather than 'people's liberation' was what modernization would ideally achieve (Gilman, 2007, p. 18).

In Russia, similarly, the liberal intelligentsia, which promoted catch-up modernization, supported Boris Yeltsin's increasingly authoritarian regime, "making him think he could do anything" to dismantle the Soviet system and built a new Russia (Sauvé, 2025, p. 3). Describing the reforms in ex-communist Central and Eastern Europe, Krastev and Holms aptly remark:

> Poles and Hungarians were told what laws and policies to enact, and simultaneously instructed to pretend that they were governing themselves. … Pretending to rule themselves while being ruled by Western policy-makers was bad enough. The last straw was being disparaged by visiting Westerners, who accused them of merely going through the motions of democracy, when that was exactly what political elites in the region thought they were being asked to do. (Krastev & Holms, 2019, p. 11).

This contradiction between the discourse and practices of modernization reflects the internal ambivalence of modernity, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1947/2002) criticize in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Since modern rationality reduces the world to what can be calculated, controlled, and used, reason becomes an instrument for controlling and disciplining life rather than expanding human autonomy. This criticism was continued by other theorists of modernity, including Habermas (1987) with his attempt to separate instrumental and communicative rationality and thereby save the normative foundations of modernity, and Bauman (1989), who viewed the Holocaust as the result of the application of modern mechanisms of control and rational organization of labor, social engineering aimed at realizing a right-wing social utopia. This theme has also been explored in various ways by Michel Foucault, Cornelius Castoriadis, Johann P. Arnason, Peter Wagner, and Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello. This critique sees modern societies as a field of constant tension, structured by two dominant poles–the demands of emancipation and authentic forms of life on the one hand, and rational domination and control on the other (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). This tension is inherent to the concept of modernization in general, due to its social-engineering focus on rational management and technocratic administration of society. It is especially striking in the case of the classical approach to modernization, based on liberalism. However, it is unclear how it works in the case of the new non-Western modernization programs. In search for the answer, I suggest analyzing the so-called conservative modernization program in Russia and then moving on to the current policy of technological modernization.

THE "CONSERVATIVE MODERNIZATION" PROGRAM

Modernization in Russia has a long conceptual history and has always been interlaced with Russia's self-determination vis-à-vis the West. The famous dispute between Slavophiles and Westernizers concerned whether Russia was part of the West as a European country or had its own path of development. In this sense, the "West," primarily Europe, served as a basic point of reference for Russia, its "Other," against which Russia's own identity has been built (Neumann, 1999).

Although the processes in the late USSR were framed not in terms of modernization but in terms of perestroika and acceleration, glasnost and democratization, the topic of modernization has gradually gained momentum since the early 1990s. In post-Soviet Russia, modernization theory provided an alternative way of understanding the historical process at a time when Marxist doctrine was suffering a historic defeat (Yakovenko, 2014). It also retained a stage-based approach and declared economic development to be the driver of socio-political change, with the significant difference that the destination was not communism but liberal democracy.

Public discussions in the late 1990s and early 2000s revealed growing dissatisfaction with the results of "shock therapy" – the name given to the reform program implemented by a team of liberal reformers led by Yegor Gaidar. These reforms were followed by the collapse of the economy, culminating in a 1998 default, a sharp decline in living standards, the impoverishment of large segments of the population, and an impressive increase in inequality. As a result, Russian society formed a lasting association between the adverse outcomes of "shock therapy," the economic collapse of the 1990s, and Western-style modernization (Vititnev, 2024; Sauvé, 2025). This triggered a search for a different model of modernization that would avoid the failures of the past, put the country on a sustainable path of development, and reinforce Russia's standing as a great power. In the middle of the 2000s, liberal and conservative approaches to modernization clashed in heated public debates about a new development model. At the time, conservative intellectual and political circles generated a request for a "national modernization project" for Russia. Moreover, several projects of conservative modernization had been formulated and discussed, including "conservative futurism" (Engström, 2016) and the Russian Doctrine that championed "the creation of a centaur of Orthodoxy and innovative economy, high spirituality and high technologies" (Averianov, 2010).

In 2009, then-president Dmitry Medvedev published an article titled "*Go Russia!*" in which he announced a large-scale modernization "based on the values and institutions of democracy" (President of Russian Federation, 2009). Scrupulous reading of Medvedev's article reveals its twofold, interim character. At first sight, the program referred to the normative liberal ideals of modernity and expressed hope for liberalization of the Russian political system. Medvedev explicitly reproduces the modernization hypothesis, interpreting technological development and the formation of an innovative economy as a necessary condition for the establishment of democracy:

> I also think that technological development is a priority public and political task because scientific and technological progress is inextricably linked with the progress of political systems. Experts believe that democracy originated in ancient Greece, but in those days there was no extensive democracy. Freedom was the privilege of a select minority. Full-fledged democracy that established universal suffrage and legal guarantees for the equality of all citizens before the law, so-called democracy for everyone emerged relatively recently, some eighty to one hundred years ago. Democracy occurred on a mass scale, not earlier than the mass production of the most necessary goods and services began. When the level of technological development of Western civilization made it possible to gain

> universal access to basic amenities: to education, health care and information. Every new invention that improves our quality of life provides us with an additional degree of freedom. It makes our existential conditions more comfortable and social relations more equitable. The more intelligent, smarter and efficient our economy is, the higher the level of our citizens' welfare, and our political system and society as a whole will also be freer, fairer and more humane (Medvedev, 2009).

Medvedev takes a negative, critical view of the present, identifying the main obstacles to growth as the raw-materials economy, the lack of innovation, chronic corruption, a "habit of relying on others," the poor quality of democratic institutions, etc. As a result, Russia's influence on the international stage has declined. Based on the problems listed, the path to the future lies through intensifying technological development, modernizing the political system, strengthening the judiciary, and fighting corruption. Medvedev's rhetoric retains a motif of future-oriented policies and breaking with the past, inherent to modernization: "Our time is truly new!... Instead of the past, we will build a real Russia – a modern, forward-looking young nation..." He distances himself from the authoritarian modernizations of the past and calls on business and civil society to join forces to build a new Russia without revolutionary upheavals. Climate change, nuclear weapons non-proliferation, technogenic risks, and international cooperation are all on the agenda.

However, a closer scrutiny of the context and further "decoding" of the provisions outlined in the article suggests some adjustments to this interpretation. As for the context, the article was written after the 2008 global financial crisis, which exposed oil-export dependency as a systemic risk and prompted authorities to diversify the economy (Trenin, 2010). In addition, the concept of "sovereign democracy" had already been put forward by Vladislav Surkov, the deputy head of the Russian presidential administration – he outlined it in his speech to United Russia activists in February 2006. Its purpose was to reject political liberalism in favor of "cultural tradition" and "authentic values" within a retained model of electoral democracy (Kiryukhin & Shcherbak, 2022). In other words, it rejected the "West" as a normative model, while imagining Russia as part of the pan-European value space:

> Russia has been led to democracy not by 'defeat in the Cold War', but by the very European nature of its culture (Surkov, 2006).

Therefore, "sovereign democracy" implied that Russia itself would determine the form and criteria of its democracy. Politically, "sovereign democracy" introduces the idea of democracy as collectively rather than individually oriented (Kazantsev, 2007). In parallel, conservatism was announced as the official ideology of the Russian ruling party, "United Russia," and was placed at the heart of its program, alongside "sovereign democracy." Although conservatism was not mentioned once in Medvedev's programmatic article or speeches at the time, it had already been part of the Russian ideological ecosystem (Bluhm, 2016). The formal head of United Russia, Boris Gryzlov, tried to reconcile these controversial liberal and conservative lines, interpreting Russian conservatism as "open" and "ready to accept new ideas, and therefore capable of

modernizing the country," so that the motto 'Go, Russia!' was considered a guide to action for Russian conservatism (Yabloko Party, 2009). Medvedev himself repeatedly appealed to patriotism, traditional family values, a strong state, belief in Russia, and the independence and freedom of the Russian state, starting with his first Annual Address to the Federal Assembly in November 2008 (Trenin, 2010).

Against the conservative ideological backdrop, the liberal appeal of Medvedev's program had taken a conservative flavor. Medvedev clearly rejects the West's exemplarity while maintaining liberal rhetoric. The program's central thesis is "We must rely only on ourselves," which refers to both the Western modernization programs and the West itself:

> Naive ideas about an infallible and happy West and an eternally underdeveloped Russia are unacceptable (Medvedev, 2009).

In other words, the goals remain rather liberal, but the path to achieving them is to be forged independently. In addition, when discussing the development of the political system and democracy, Medvedev does not clarify their meanings, except to say that Russian society will be wealthier, "freer, fairer, and more humane."

At the same time, the emphasis on technological innovation as the economic driver stands in stark contrast to the market fundamentalism of the 1990s (Shcherbak, 2018). This emphasis embraces a technocratic interpretation of Soviet history: although the Soviet Union achieved technological breakthroughs, many of these technologies have since become obsolete, necessitating new breakthroughs. Soviet cutting-edge technologies are seen as an essential contribution to the Soviet/Russia's past greatness and victories. The past serves as a lost ideal – the message, in fact, is to restore Russia's past greatness on new foundations in a new context. Thus, "the tense relationship between attitudes toward the past, belief in Russia's great culture, and aspiration toward the future becomes a hidden but significant foundation" of Medvedev's modernization project (Kalinin, 2010). Medvedev's text combines technocratic rhetoric with "an attempt to use the negative nostalgic energy of the gap between the past and the present" as the driving force of modernization (Kalinin, 2010). As can be seen, Medvedev's model attempted to fit a future framed in liberal terms into the reconstructed historical horizon of "Great Russia" and link them through "patriotism" and "great culture." As a result, a hybrid of "conservative modernization" was born.

Medvedev's modernization program was thus ambivalent. Despite its emancipatory potential, many Russian liberals initially criticized the document for its conservative motifs (Trenin, 2010), lately describing the subsequent conservative consolidation of Kremlin politics as a process of demodernization, either politically (Rozov, 2024) or in a broader sense (Rabkin & Minakov, 2018). After Vladimir Putin returned to power in 2012, the concept of conservative modernization lost its political significance, though conceptual discussions of it continued in Russian conservative intellectual circles (Vititnev, 2024; Diskin, 2021). Since then, the term "modernization" has not disappeared from official texts, but it has been used strictly in a technical sense. Subsequent political discourse and policies run with the conservative overtones and technocratic tendencies of Medvedev's program, while ditching its liberal ideals.

STATE-CIVILIZATION RUSSIA AND TECHNOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION

The beginning of Putin's third term is often seen as a shift away from the pragmatism that was a hallmark of his first two terms (Frear & Mazepus, 2020) to the conservative (Bluhm, 2016; Laruelle, 2025) or civilizational discourse (Tsygankov, 2016). The vision of Russia as a distinct non-Western civilization has roots in the Slavophiles and Nikolay Danilevsky's works and was later developed and promoted by Eurasianists. After the collapse of the USSR, this vision crystallized in writings by Alexandr Panarin, Vadim Tsymbursky, and Alexandr Dugin in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a conservative reaction to post-Soviet liberal universalism, gradually making its way into official discourse. The question is how the language of "distinct civilization" made its way from the political margins in the 1990s to become widely employed by top officials and what it means in the context of technological development.

During his first two presidential terms, Putin considered Russia to be part of European civilization, sharing the same values from Lisbon to Vladivostok. This is clearly expressed, for example, in his Annual Address to the Federal Assembly in 2005:

> Russia was, is and will, of course, be a major European power. Achieved through much suffering by European culture, the ideals of freedom, human rights, justice, and democracy have for many centuries been our society's determining values (President of the Russian Federation, 2005).

During Medvedev's 2008–2012 presidency, the civilizational framework competed with modernization discourse – the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept (FPC) framed foreign policy in terms of a global interstate competition emerging along civilizational fault lines, implying that Russia was a distinct civilizational pole with its own values and development model (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 7) and calling for dialogue among civilizations. However, this civilizational language was applied to the international system rather than to Russia as a self-designation.

Starting in 2012, the concept of "state-civilization" began to feature prominently in Vladimir Putin's speeches and articles. The Russian president adopted the language of civilization at home and abroad "in response to the situation of ontological insecurity," since he identified "the Western language of democracy and human rights as a form of ideological pressure" (Tsygankov, 2016, pp. 9-10). In his article "*Russia: The Ethnicity Issue*," Putin (2012) rejects ethnonationalism and labels Russia "a multiethnic civilization with Russian culture at its core." The Russian president operates there with the concept of "state-civilization," making the state itself the primary bearer of Russian identity and contraposing it to both ethnic nationalisms, on the one hand, and liberal civic universalism, on the other. State institutions, together with Russian culture and language – which constitute the national cultural (civilizational) code–serve here as the foundation of social unity – the glue that binds together the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of Russian society. However, this emphasis on Russian civilization and identity was not sustained and was almost absent from official documents by 2018, as the focus shifted to security issues (Frear & Mazepus, 2020, p. 19).

The FPC, adopted in March 2023, is the first to explicitly describe Russia as a conservative, technologically oriented, sovereign "country-civilization" (given that the 2025 National Security Strategy again refers to a "state-civilization," I will not dwell on these intriguing terminological nuances at this point). Therefore, the 2023 FPC represents a qualitative shift: previous FPCs used civilizational vocabulary to describe the international system (a world of diverse civilizations, and Russia as one player among others), whereas the 2023 FPC uses it to designate Russia itself in the international arena as a civilizational subject with a distinct identity, mission, and claim to a sphere of civilizational community. This is the difference between civilizational pluralism as a descriptive framework for world order and civilizational identity as a constitutive self-description – a shift with significant implications for how technological modernization and sovereignty are framed, since it claims civilizational self-sufficiency in a way the former did not.

The 2023 FPC turns the rejection of Western normative exemplarity into a struggle against Western hegemony, with Russia claiming the vanguard of the global anti-colonial movement. This document employs decolonial discourse, appealing to the Soviet Union's support for decolonization, but frames it through appeals to civilizational identity and cultural-religious struggles – in other words, it aligns with what, in the West, appears as right-wing rhetoric. Russia criticizes the West, mainly the US, for seeking unilateral dominance and accuses it of neocolonial and hegemonic ambitions, and defends the right of sovereign states "to choose models of development, and social, political and economic order," as well as "non-interference in internal affairs" and

> diversity of cultures, civilizations, and models of social organization, non-imposition of their models of development, ideology, and values on other countries by all states, and reliance on a spiritual and moral guideline common to all world traditional religions and secular ethical systems. (Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2023)

The construction of a "state-civilization" continues the line already visible in the concept of "sovereign democracy," equating the rejection of the West's normative superiority with anti-colonial struggle and justifying this rejection by appealing to Russia's own civilizational foundations. At the same time, the idea of technological leadership, as we have observed, has already been identified as a key element of Russian policy and political rhetoric in Putin's early article (1999). More recently, it has been outlined in the Executive Order of May 7, 2024, "*On the Development Goals of the Russian Federation through 2030 and for the Future Until 2036*." This document is a striking example of the sociotechnical imagination of what I call "technological modernization," though the term "modernization" appears only 2 times in reference to infrastructure improvements – the keywords are "development" (22 times) and "state" (24 times in the Russian original). National goals are centered here around two poles, the state and the populace (people). Care for the people is the priority: "preservation of the population, strengthening health and improving the wellbeing of people, supporting families" (President of the Russian Federation, 2024). Expanding the housing stock, infrastructure, addressing climate change and environmental issues are also on the

agenda. Quite in line with the setting of a practical, that is, a technical and administrative agenda, notions of democracy and self-governance do not play a role even where the reduction of inequalities is set as a rare example of an explicitly political goal. Along with enhancing technological leadership and digitalizing the state, economy, and social sphere, the state takes these measures in the interests of its population. In this construction, the state and the populace merge, making the promotion and protection of "traditional Russian spiritual and moral values" one of the decree's central tasks. Another no less important task is educating youth in a patriotic spirit and creating state-funded opportunities for vertical social mobility for talented and loyal young people. At the same time, ensuring network sovereignty and information security is also a priority.

In this context, the ambiguity of the outlined political discourse catches the eye. On the one hand, it emphasizes cultural differences, values, and identity as the organic foundations of a distinct social and political order. On the other hand, it does not criticize the universal achievements of modernity to which Russia itself has contributed significantly and which explicitly remain a priority – namely, science, technology, the global economy, infrastructure… Put differently, the state-civilization concept disaggregates the modernization package by positing that technology, on the one hand, and political institutions and values, on the other, are separable. It is possible to take technology and leave values behind because it belongs to a distinct civilization with its own relationship to technology, its own developmental logic, and its own legitimate institutional forms. The state-civilization framework transforms coproduction, as Jasanoff defines it, by de-universalizing and detaching Western governance forms from Western technology, and by insisting that they are civilizational choices of a particular civilization, imposed globally as if they were universal. It can be illustrated with the example of digital sovereignty (tsifrovoi suverenitet): it is not a claim to build its own internet from scratch – it rather implies that the underlying infrastructure is the same, but will be governed by Russian state institutions, filtered through Russian legal frameworks, insulated from Western platform monopolies and Western content standards. The technology is the same – the content and institutional wrapping are Russian civilizational (the same logic applies to AI). As Putin has put it recently on the *Future Technologies Forum*,

> I have repeatedly emphasised: equal access to future technologies, rather than privileges for the chosen few [meaning the Western societies – S.S.], is an indispensable condition for the equitable development of our civilisation. (Putin, 2025)

I will illustrate the practical implementation of the outlined sociotechnical imaginary through two cases: first, the development and top-down implementation of the ideology of "the human being of the future," and second, the introduction of the social architect.

A Kremlin official, Boris Rapoport (2025), has recently presented his revised version of Sergei Uvarov's triad, "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality," formulated in 1833 as opposition to the revolutionary "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité." Rapoport interpreted Uvarov's formula as reflecting three constants that shape the Russian national

character and can be traced throughout Russian history. The first of these constants is messianism, expressed through a sense of special responsibility and a model of development intended as an alternative to the Western one; today, it is articulated in the concept of a just multipolar world. The second is conciliarity (sobornost'), that is, the ability of society to consolidate around a common goal in times of trial. The third is the pursuit of fairness (Rapoport, 2025). Now they have been transformed into new triads, which look as follows:

Table 1. New Triads (SS, based on Rapoport's text)

Constants	Social correlates	Activity	Faith	Feelings
Messianism	sovereign country	active patriotism	in the country	Pride
Consiliarity	traditional society	creative labor	in those around us	Confidence
Fairness	social state	Service	In the future	Hope

At the same time, the imaginaries of the future based on traditional values are assumed to be constructed and promoted, intentionally and reflectively, also through modern digital technology. Therefore, this kind of ideological creativity is complemented by the introduction of a new profession: "social architects." In January 2025, applications opened for a social architect competition organized by the Expert Institute for Social Research, with support from the ANO "Russia – Land of Opportunity" and the Presidential Academy of RANEPA (three of the Kremlin Administration's think tanks). These new professionals are supposed to work with the population within the framework of the state ideology, promoting traditional values and patriotic education, working with youth and territorial self-government, addressing environmental issues, etc. (Konkurs sotsial'nykh arkhitektorov, 2025). This involves "proactive modeling and designing of social processes," meaning mediating the relationship between authorities and the population as a new form of social engineering. The social architects will rely on large data sets, sociological surveys, and AI in their work.

This field is developing very quickly, apparently in response to the authorities' demand. In 2025, the first master's programs were launched, and in December, the first textbook was presented at the first International Conference on Social Architecture, held at St. Petersburg State University. According to the speaker, who presented the new textbook (Sergey Volodenkov, professor at the Faculty of Political Science at Lomonosov Moscow State University), the textbook is based on

> A simple, but essential idea: the future of society is not predetermined, it is designed; the future of society is not predestined, it is constructed. This is our response to the challenges of our time, when spontaneous social changes must

give way not only to purposeful but also to holistically oriented construction of social reality (Konkurs sotsial'nykh arkhitektorov, 2025a).

As for the conference, it included sections such as "Modeling the Future: Conceptual Approaches and Solutions" and "Civilizational Foundations and Value Orientations in Designing the Future" (Sotsial'naya arkhitektura, 2025b). The presence of Alexander Dugin and Valery Fedorov in the presidium suggests close cooperation between sociologists and ideologists aimed at social engineering. As one of the conference participants noted, the topic at hand was "*the de-Westernization of political processes in non-Western parts of the world*" (Konkurs sotsial'nykh arkhitektorov, 2025a).

The resulting policy landscape aligns with the modern ideas of rational domination and instrumental rationality and can be loosely described as "technological modernization," since politics as such disappears from this sociotechnical imaginary, replaced by a specific art of governmentality. "Technological modernization" combines the future-oriented temporal structure inherent in the concept of modernization with an engineering, instrumental approach to society. The development of digital technologies and AI is also embedded in the normative framework of state-civilization, and the question of its implications for social and political dynamics remains open.

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