

A Minuscule Third Estate

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On Dec. 5, 2011, the day after the widely disputed State Duma elections, the first large-scale demonstration was staged and the protest movement was born.

Those protests showed that Russia does have a third estate, and it — not the Communists, neo-Nazis or liberals — is the core of the grass-roots protest movement.

While the third estate is generally understood to mean the masses, in Russia it is a small minority. In Russia, the masses are dependent on the state like drug addicts are dependent on narcotics. They wait each month for their monthly fix of guaranteed salaries in their guaranteed-for-life jobs, regardless of productivity. They take a negative view of the values that the traditional third estate in France considered essential to a progressive, more democratic society.

In the 19th century, people in Asian countries who wanted to extricate themselves from the quagmire caused by ineffective and obsolete leaders knew exactly what to do: follow the Europeans by eliminating the boyars, emirs and samurai and upholding the inviolability of private property.

Now, "doing it the European way" means returning free elections and true universal suffrage. Unfortunately, in a country where a large part of the population is poor and dependent on the state, free elections do not lead to anything but a new dictatorship, one led by a populist who promises voters the very things they had dreamed about over a glass of vodka.

In any case, it will not lead to reforms, which only rile the masses dependent on the state and the robber-baron minority that feeds like parasites on them. Russia already tried the European approach in 1991 and ended up with President Vladimir Putin.

In the 19th century, states had to modernize or face extinction by military conquest. Under current, more peaceful conditions, dictators do not have the same motivation to modernize. On the contrary, dictators are motivated to make the third estate as small and as marginalized as possible and make the common people as dependent as possible on the government. In other words, the leaders want to stack the deck in their own favor.

Free elections in a country rich in oil but poor in democracy and rule of law can only lead to someone like Putin or Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez coming to power. This is because dictators fear the third estate and its demands for freedom and private property even more than they fear being conquered in war. Make a move to the left and you lose your horse.

Of course, miracles do sometimes occur, but sitting around every day hoping for a miracle to come is a strange way to live.

In the end, I am afraid that the protest movement in Russia will continue to lose ground unless a catastrophic global crisis occurs, one that serves as shock therapy, one that will lead not only to a drop in oil prices but also to a rethinking of the world's established ideologies.

The problem is that the window of opportunity is quite narrow. The regime's degradation, the brain drain, the mass immigration of cheap labor from Central Asia is occurring at such a fast clip that if this crisis doesn't happen in the next five or 10 years, there will be nothing left of Russia to reform.

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