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Contemporary Russia as a Palace-neopolitar State and Economy

Abstract. In the context of the apparent failure of Russia's attempt to modernise itself during the post-communist period of its being, one of the actual tasks for social sciences is to identify the nature of the state and the economic system of contemporary Russia as well as historically determined dominants of its development in the foreseeable future. The article offers to solve that task through an inter-disciplinary junction of most relevant concepts of the politar/neopolitar economy, studying the Horde genesis of Muscovy-Russia, its political and historical notions of the «palace state».

The Putin Russia's historical roots are traced from early class politar societies of Asia and Aegeide, especially the Cretan «palace» states all through the 2nd millennium BC, through the post-Horde Muscovy and the post-Petrine Russian state «privatised» by nobility, up to a number of communist and oligarchic dictatorships of the 20th century. The mechanisms of a large-scale redistribution of assets accumulated in power-property of Russia's ruling elite are outlined through the case study of the RUSNANO state-owned company specialising in nanotechnologies. In contrast to the present day Ukrainian economy (being predominantly neo-feudal but with a dynamically developing segment of capitalist relations of the European type), in Russia under Putin one can observe the phenomenon of two-tier property, which is characteristic of politar societies, i.e. while this property is officially registered in the name of legal entities and individuals, its supreme owner and arbiter is actually the top-brass of the federal bureaucracy acting on behalf of the entire ruling class.

Thus, the socio-political and economic system of contemporary Russia may be identified as palace-neopolitar, wherein the top bureaucratic oligarchy has usurped power controlling and redistributing, the core economic resources and assets of the country with the purpose of its own utmost enrichment. Moreover, due to the escalation of the systemic conflict of Russia with the West and, more broadly, with the world of modernity, further consolidation of the palace-neopolitar power and economy, which brings under control and increasingly distorts the segment of competitive market relations, is taking place. The above means that the unlikely success of today's Russian modernisation would threaten the very foundations of the Russian statehood.

Keywords: Power-property; Palace State; Horde; Russian Federation; RUSNANO

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Сучасна Росія як палацово-неополітарна держава і економіка

Анотація. У світлі очевидного провалу чергової, тепер уже посткомуністичної, спроби російської модернізації, зростаючого відчуження Росії від світу модерніти залишається відкритим питання щодо природи сучасної російської державності та економіки. У статті пропонується вирішити цю задачу шляхом міждисциплінарної стиковки найбільш релевантних концепцій політарної/неополітарної економіки, ординської генетики Московії-Росії, політичних та історичних понять палацової держави. На прикладі держкомпанії «РОСНАНО» аналізуються механізми редистрибуції недиференційованої влади-власності верхівкою бюрократ-олігархії. Показано, що малоймовірний сьогодні успіх російської модернізації загрожував би самим основам сучасної РФ.

Ключові слова: влада-власність; палацова держава; Орда; Російська Федерація; РОСНАНО.

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Современная Россия как дворцово-неополитарные государство и экономика

Аннотация. В свете очевидного провала очередной, теперь уже посткоммунистической, попытки российской модернизации, растущего отчуждения России от мира модернити остается открытым вопрос о природе современной российской государственности и экономики. В статье предлагается решить эту задачу путем междисциплинарной стиковки наиболее релевантных концепций политарной/неополитарной экономики, ордынской генетики современной России, политических и исторических понятий дворцового государства. На примере госкомпании «РОСНАНО» анализируются механизмы редистрибуции недифференцированной власти-собственности верхушкой бюрократ-олигархии. Показано, что маловероятный сегодня успех российской модернизации может грозить самим основам современной РФ.

Ключевые слова: власть-собственность; дворцовое государство; Орда; Российская Федерация; РОСНАНО.

1. Introduction. The effective European integration policy of Ukraine is impossible without understanding the route of socio-political «transit» of its largest neighbour, those fundamental civilizational and cultural dominant ideas, the cultural and historical substrate that determine and will determine in the foreseeable future the development of the Russian Federation and the Eurasian area which remains in the sphere of its influence.

Modern transitology based on the theories of neo-liberalism and globalism does not give any convincing, consistent answer to the questions about the fatal failure of democratic reforms after the dismantling of the communist administrative

command economy in Russia and a number of other former Soviet republics. It is evident that the failure of post-communist Russia's modernisation, the country's growing self-isolation from the civilized world, the glaring gap between the outwardly democratic forms of the public institutions and their paternalistic and clientelistic, anti-Western mechanisms dictate the need for further comprehension of the essence, historical and civilizational genesis of the socio-economic system, political regime and paradigmatic conditions of the development of contemporary Russia.

2. Brief Literature Review. In the mid-1990s, as a critical reevaluation of the experience of the first years of post-Soviet

transformation, the neo-modernisation approach emerges, according to which such institutional structures as democracy, law and market, in spite of being functionally important, do not represent any historically inevitable or linearly imperative results [1]. At the turn of the 20th-21st centuries, the most prominent and consistent supporters of world development multi-linearity were such Western scientists and scholars as Andre Gunder Frank, David Harvey, Samuel Huntington, Vladimir Shlapentokh, Immanuel Wallerstein, along with Andrey Korotayev, Nikolay Kradin, Yuriy Semenov and Leonid Vasilyev from Russia; Azar Gat from Israel, and Serhii Krymskyi and Yuriy Pavlenko from Ukraine.

Works by contemporary researchers on issues related to the East-West civilizational and axiological dichotomy and the Eurasian (Horde-era) roots of Muscovy-Russian statehood, among whom are Aleksander Akhiezer, Sergey Gavrov, Lev Gumilyov, Svyatoslav Kaspe, Eduard Kulpin, Charles Halperin, Abbott Gleason, Donald Ostrowski, Richard Pipes, Alexander Yanov and Yuriy Pavlenko play an important role in understanding the nature of the economy and the social order of today's Russia. Karl Wittfogel [2] and Igor Shafarevich [3] showed that the Soviet-Chinese-type socialism represented in resuscitation of the traditional for the Oriental despotic and bureaucratic social order had adapted to the conditions of the industrial society of the 20th century. Yuriy Semenov associates the societies described by Igor Shafarevich as «socialist» with the politar or Asiatic mode of production [4], while L. S. Vasiliev emphasises on the state mode of production [5]. To such societies, known as politarchies, «the identity <...> of the ruling class with the machinery of government, of the surplus produce distribution system <...> with the political hierarchy <...>, with posts within the system of administration» is peculiar [4, 58]. Serhii Krymskyi and Yuriy Pavlenko were strong supporters of this concept [6, 48]. According to Yuriy Semenov, capitalism coexists in contemporary Russia with a particular, «degenerative» hierarchy politarchy, while capitalist relations play in this economic system a clearly subordinate role compared to the politar ones [4, 390].

Scientists who do not share the concept of the special Eastern type and path of society development prefer to talk about the «wrong development of Russia since the times of the Horde» [7; 8], about «neo-feudalism» [9], or about «moderate feudalism» [10, 107]. Russian economist Vladislav Inozemtsev and economic historian Maksym Kyrchanov believe that Russian Federation under President Putin may be viewed as a neo-feudal structure with increasing feudal trends [11; 12]. However, M. Kyrchanov recognises the limited nature of the neo-feudal concept in the analysis of the post-Soviet realities [12, 6].

Irina Glebova, an eminent Russian political scientist, proposed to name the social order into which the post-Soviet «civilization of the upper class» in the Russian Federation has transformed, a «palace state» [13; 14; 25]. The term had been used by Vasily Klyuchevsky to define the state of the post-Petrine Russia of the 18th century «privatised» by the nobility [15, 330]. However, Glebova views the «palace state» with regard to the contemporary Russian Federation only as a metaphor for the form of government and does not substantiate it either in terms of historical social formations or economic theory.

In the context of the above, the lack of the integrative system approach to the studies of the post-Soviet Russia observed by Vladimir Shlapentokh [10, 7] remains an issue of great interest.

3. Purpose. By using the achievements of Neomodernist theory and applying the inter-disciplinary approach, the author will attempt to open up the concepts of a) the politar/neopolitar society (the so-called *Asiatic* or the *state* mode of production); b) the Horde genesis of Muscovy-Russia; c) the «palace state» in order to comprehend and define the nature of the contemporary Russian state and economy.

For the purposes of this article, we understand by «mode of production» a special, due to the prevailing relations of ownership of economic resources, form of organization of economic activity and distribution of its results within which reproduction of the entire social system takes place.

4. Results. As it was shown back in 1957 by German-American sociologist Karl Wittfogel, social revolutions in countries

with the predominantly Asiatic mode of production may not be revolutions in the proper sense of the word if they just perpetuate the same oppressive social order in different institutional and procedural forms [2]. Despite the external borrowing of technological forms of progress (industrialisation, urbanisation, increased vertical and horizontal mobility, development of science and education, etc.) from the West, as it was in the case of Peter I (who, as Maximilian Voloshin aptly put it, «was the first Bolshevik» [16, 344]), the Bolshevik revolution put new socio-structural and ethos roadblocks to the development of Western capitalism [17, 74-75]. Both in the Petrine and post-reform Russia and in the USSR «the means of modernisation were exclusively oppressive and did not fit into the context of the European tradition at all» [18]. As a result, the deep foundations of the conservative paternalistic and clientelistic system of power and economic relations remained unchanged. The new social «revolution» that occurred in Russia in the early 1990s did not change it either, despite the fact that, as Ukrainian political scientist Mykola Holovatyi rightly points out, just «critical alienation of the people from property and power» turned out to be the main social reason for the collapse of the USSR in the late 20th century [19, 5-6].

The contemporary Russian socio-economic system is essentially a product of evolution of the Soviet super-statism. According to estimates by Russian sociologist Aleksandr Tarasov, no less than 80% of the new business elite of Russia are represented by the former Soviet nomenclature (including their adult children) who added ownership to power [20]. In post-communist Russia, both economic policy and economic activity itself turn out to be, in fact, just the reverse side of the monopoly of power; they do not need any «rational capitalistic organisation of free [...] labour» [21, 50], serving only as a cover for insatiable consumption of rent and public revenues by the ruling clan, and therefore, they are not capitalist in the Western, Weberian sense both in terms of motivation and conditions of their implementation. One can notice deep-going links between the anti-modernisation trends, for example, in the Indian economy in the first decades after the country's independence, and the Russian post-Soviet economy: both of them are based on «an elaborate network of patronage and subsidies» [22, 65] and a bloated public sector of the economy that the bureaucracy *de facto* used as their collective property.

In contemporary Russia, antimodernism (now actively promoted by the right-wing conservative circles of the Russian Orthodox Church, of the Izborsk Club, by ideologists of Eurasianism led by Aleksandr Dugin, and other entities close to the Kremlin [23]), takes forms of violent confrontation not only with modernism, but also with antiquity with its ideal of man free in his choice, which makes one look for the fundamental principles of the social order of Putin's Russia in early class societies that had existed even before the onset of the Axial Age not only in Asia (in what today is China, India, Islamic countries, etc.), but also in Africa, Mediterranean Europe (Crete, Cyprus), and pre-Columbian America. The basis of such a society is represented by an «undifferentiated power-ownership» ensuring power and high standing to those who dispose of the public property through performing leading economic, primarily economic, organisational and redistributive functions» [24, 69]. In such a society, individuals could only fulfil themselves as much as they were close to power.

Richard Pipes considers that the nature of Russia is based on the sustainable, formed shortly after the transfer of sovereignty over the Muscovy state from Sarai to Moscow, patrimonial tradition, i.e. on viewing the state as private property, patrimony of the ruler [7, 61-76, 91-100]. In fact, since the time of Ivan III, Muscovy has been the direct heir of the empire of the Chingizids who under new historical conditions inherited and implemented the principles of effective management of a large despotic empire borrowed by the Mongols from China they had conquered. The system of edicts (*yarliqs*) introduced in Rus by the Golden Horde was a hangover of Sino-centrism. In the area of public law, by establishing an administrative structure for extracting tribute, the Mongol-Tatar invaders laid the foundations for the notion of the state autocracy in Russia [25, 4]. In the final analysis, Russia together with a

group of Central Asian countries represents today what, over extended historical periods of the global leadership of China and Chinese civilization, was regarded as the «barbaric» periphery of the Celestial Empire, which also included the Mongolian Horde's territory along with the states and nations subdued by the Horde.

A special kind of the Asiatic mode of production is represented by the so-called palace economy – an economic system where the elite monopolises some resource or a group of similar resources and redistributes them through a centralised unit («palace»). Palace economy corresponds to a social order, which in a «palace state» is based on the elite having maximum access to luxury goods and amusements, which is also true regarding the classes of bureaucracy, priests, and working masses ensuring, along with small-scale natural economy, execution of large-scale public works. The system of «palace economy» established in Crete at the turn of the 2nd millennium B.C., continued to develop until the end of the 2nd millennium B.C. It was fundamentally no different from the socio-economic model of the Middle Eastern civilizations of the Bronze Age (those of Anatolia, Syro-Phoenician coast, Canaan and others) [26]. A number of modern dictatorships with a very high degree of centralisation and ideological control resemble the «palace economy». They are the totalitarian regimes of North Korea, Pol Pot's Kampuchea, military juntas in Latin America widespread in the 20th century, regimes of «banana republics» of Africa (since 1960s), etc.

The transformation of the Soviet «workers' state» into the post-Soviet «palace» state occurred in a historical context which was in some basic features reminiscent of the post-Petrine Russia of the 18th century. I. Glebova considers that a «palace state» is a form (or organisation), which includes both old and new ruling groups that split off from the population to form a privileged class (1.5-2% of the population) [13, 65]. Belonging to the «palace» is visualised in the Russian version by «being well received» in the Kremlin, i.e. by high-ranking people who, tentatively speaking, work in the Kremlin or are regularly invited to the Kremlin palaces or offices. In a sense, the «palace» can be considered a corporation, but the nature of the «palace» is directly opposed to the capitalist one: it is «possessory» implying monopolistic exploitation of both basic material resources/assets and «subjects» themselves [27].

As part of the corrupt «palace» communications, the financial industrial oligarchy makes a specified payment for the exclusive use of profitable resources and assets assigned for them by the «palace», thus becoming «statesmen», while the bureaucracy becomes commercialised pursuing the sole purpose which is enrichment [13, 70, 75-76]. In full conformity with the Horde's tradition, the «palace» understands power primarily as the right to «impose a tribute». The «palace» actors deny the «non-palace» population (the symbolic «shack») the right to exercise control over the productive wealth of the country, and, accordingly, to form civil society. The «palace state» (in sharp contrast to modern Western democracies, especially federations, striving for national consensus [see 28, 13]) insistently ignores the principle of «egalitarian reciprocity» in its relations to Russia's diverse social and ethnic groups, not to mention individual citizens.

Getting rid of the service burden which had been appropriate (except for some limited periods of time) to the Muscovite Tsardom – the Petersburg Empire – the USSR, the «emancipated» Russian state lives for itself. I. Glebova writes: «From the point of view of the «palace», society has shrunk to a «limited contingent» required to serve the «palace». According to various estimates, it amounts from 10 to 17% of the population employed in relatively effective economic sectors [...] It is a kind of «airbag» for the «palace», its social base imparting it stability and allowing it to expand, to a certain extent, though» [27].

The «palace» in contemporary Russia is a kind of «state within a state» of neopolitair type, being nested like the Russian matryoshka, on the socio-hierarchical, functional (redistributive), regional and even geographical grounds, forming conditional «Moscow», «Moscow within the Garden Ring road», «the Kremlin», «the Senate (Presidential in fact) Palace in Kremlin», etc.

If, at the beginning of «the Putin era», the share of the public sector accounted for about one-third of the Russian economy, in the mid-2000s, when the state took the «commanding heights» of the economy again, this figure amounted to at least 50% of the country's GDP [29] and is maintained at such a level to this day. Even in the context of the deep economic crisis in the Russian Federation which was caused by the slumping world oil prices and economic sanctions of the West due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Kremlin does not intend to sell shares in the state-owned companies to private investors [30].

Let us consider a typical example of how government property is managed in the context of the «palace state» and «palace economy.» In July 2007, a special federal law established the government-owned corporation of nanotechnologies RUSNANO (or RUSNANO JSC since March 2011). In November 2007, the Russian government made an asset contribution in the amount of 130 billion rubles (5.3 billion US dollars at the official rate established then by the Central Bank of the Russian Federation) to support the activities of the corporation [31, 48]. 100% of the shares of RUSNANO JSC are owned by the state. The company's core business is investing funds in **private** (emphasis added – I. P.) projects to set up new nanotechnological plants and factories [32].

Since September 2008, a former head of the Presidential Administration, «father» of Russian privatisation Anatoly Chubais is the Chief Executive Officer of RUSNANO. The highest governing body of RUSNANO JSC is the Board of Directors, whose members make not only strategic but also operating managerial decisions on financial and property matters. Four out of the 11 members of the Board of Directors are top-ranking government officials, including the Deputy Prime Minister, the other 4 are professional attorneys of the Russian government (the institution introduced by the Kremlin in 2011 for the government-owned corporations to replace the independent directors), among whom Anatoly Chubais and multibillionaire Viktor Vekselberg are [33].

Thus, among members of the Board of Directors the governmental officials or agents make up 72.7% of its composition, while there are no independent directors representing the actual business sector of nanotechnologies at all, in sharp contrast to the Western practice of state property management. It should be noted that Viktor Vekselberg plays a key role not only in Kremlin's image-building investment projects (he is the president of Skolkovo Foundation), but also in cultural projects of the «palace» as, for example, purchase in 2004 of the world's largest private collection of Faberge jewelry, its demonstration in the Moscow Kremlin and later in dozens of cities in Russia and abroad. His former fellow student at the Moscow Institute of Transport Engineers and now American multibillionaire Leonard Blavatnik owning huge assets in the West is his closest business partner [34]. Thus, a large-scale redistribution of assets accumulated in power-property of the «palace» is ensured through suchlike institutions and due to such an informal relationship.

The audit of RUSNANO performed on a parliamentary inquiry in April 2013 by the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation revealed lack of any documents confirming the effectiveness of the investments made, evidence of money laundering and legalisation through investment transactions, obtaining unjustified tax benefits and so on. At the same time, the expenses of RUSNANO over 5 years of its activities amounted to nearly 200 billion rubles. However, the «moderator» of the «palace», Russian President Vladimir Putin took RUSNANO publicly (during a live call-in show) under his shelter, and the Russian law enforcement agencies virtually ignored the audit results [35]. In December 2015, RUSNANO announced expansion of debt financing against sovereign guarantees [36]. Nevertheless, in January 2016, the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation reaffirmed that «virtually none of the projects, in which state-owned corporation RUSNANO invested funds has shown good returns yet» [37].

It is no surprise in this context that in 2014 Russia's state budget revenues from the use of publicly and municipally owned but actually «restrictedly collectively held (by the «palace»)

property» [13, 68] amounted to only about 3% [38], while even in the pre-revolutionary Russia, which had been called «the realm of bureaucracy,» state-owned property and capitals had generated about one third of the state budget revenues (30.5% in 1913) [39, 2].

A. N. Tarasov suggested expressing the social essence of the ruling class of contemporary Russia through the term «bureaucratic bourgeoisie» [20]. In our view, «bureaucratic oligarchy» would be a more appropriate term, as the ruling establishment the contemporary Russian Federation (in double unity of its bureaucratic and oligarchic sides) is not bourgeois but politar both by its origin and its current socio-economic status.

Property relations in contemporary Ukraine and Russia differ essentially by their nature: in Ukraine, it is entirely private, although threatened by illegal takeovers on the part of rival «lords» and their clans, property of oligarchic clans vying for regional power and a share of power in the central government. It resembles the property of suzerains (seigniors) in feudal Europe.

Thus, we can describe the current economic system in Ukraine as a predominantly neo-feudal European-style one with, however, a dynamically developing segment of capitalist relations, which, after the overthrow of the kleptocratic regime of Viktor Yanukovich, got a chance to achieve superiority over the neo-feudal relations in the future.

At the same time, we can see the phenomenon of two-tier property in Putin's Russia, which is characteristic of politar societies: on the one hand, property is formally subject to private law; its lion's share is registered in the name of individuals or state-owned corporations, on the other hand, the supreme owner and arbiter of property is actually the top-brass of the

federal bureaucracy personified by the President and his inner circle acting on behalf of the entire ruling class. A verdict of this «ultimate authority» (a kind of «the Supreme Privy Council») turns out to be decisive, absolutely mandatory and final for the destiny of any oligarchic and other property in the country. Consequently, we observe a neopolitar socioeconomic formation rather than neo-feudalism in Russia. Moreover, due to the escalation of the systemic conflict of Russia with the West and, more broadly, with the world of modernity, further consolidation of the palace-neopolitar power and economy, which brings under control and increasingly distorts the segment of competitive market relations, is taking place.

5. Conclusions. The foregoing indicates that the fundamental principle of the politar mode of production and the corresponding conservative, anti-modernisation by its nature social structure continue to persist in the civilizational substrate of the Russian statehood. As the systemic conflict of Russia with the West and, more broadly, with the world of modernity escalates, the «palace» nature of the contemporary Russian state and the Russian economy, the noneconomic, power-possessory nature of deriving revenue by the main actors (both economic entities and individuals) of the Russian domestic «market» becomes increasingly evident.

Thus, the contemporary Russian Federation is a state of the palace-neopolitar type (that is, a palace state with a neopolitar economy), wherein the top bureaucratic oligarchy has established, *de jure* or *de facto*, a monopoly on power controlling and redistributing the core economic resources and assets of the country with the purpose of its utmost enrichment. This means that the unlikely success of today's Russian modernisation would threaten the very foundations of the Russian statehood.

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