In her new book The Return of Ideology Cheng Chen of University at Albany, State University of New York, argues that as a nation makes the transition from communism to democracy or something else, its regime must construct a new political ideology that can guide policy and provide a sense of mission and national togetherness. This is needed for engendering legitimacy among the populace as well as the support of domestic political and economic elites, and is a precondition for the regime’s long-term viability. In the book Cheng Chen compares the Russian Federation after 1991 and post-Deng China during roughly the same period, and investigates the degree of success of the ideology-building projects in the two great powers.

More specifically, Chen argues that successful ideology-building requires that the regime establish a coherent ideological repertoire which takes into account the domestic ideological heritage and accommodates the surges of nationalism that seem almost destined to occur to fill the ideological void after the downfall of Cold-War type communism. The Chinese regime was in especially dire need of a new ideology as it had abandoned the communist ideology in all but the name of the ruling party, instead fully embracing the tenets of market economy. Chen’s observation is that whereas creating a new regime ideology thus was complicated enough in China, it has been even more difficult in Russia. In both cases, she argues, national great power aspirations have been largely used as a surrogate for ideology. In both cases the Golden Ages of the national past have been vividly drawn upon, as have periods of national humiliation by the hands of intervening foreign powers. Such glue holds formidable emotional power and makes up a compelling legitimizing force.

It may simply be a matter of semantics and terminology, but whereas Chen holds that such nationalist sentiments are used instead of ideology, I would argue that they do make up an ideology in its own right. This is especially so as Chen defines ideology as “any coherent and consistent system of ideas advanced officially by state elites to define and promote a regime identity and mission that transcends individual leaders, parties, and political generations” (p. 4). In those terms, the nationalist ideas indeed constitute the very ideological platform that the post-Deng regime in China and the post-Soviet regime in Russia have built their power on, the coherence criterion perhaps being the only potentially critical one. In both countries, however, the nationalist platform clearly filled the idealational void.

Chen argues that the nationalist platform is more amorphous in Russia than in China. This may be so, but also in Russia this platform holds the elements of a predetermined mission as a great power, the emphasis on domestic order and stability, the fear of foreign meddling and intervention, and an Us-versus-Them logics with a corresponding and recurring quest for internal and external enemies. From these elements political dynamics and energy are drawn to construct popularly appealing politics. In fact, this is populism as power rather than populism opposed to power, which we have become used to seeing in Western Europe. It goes with the territory that such an essentially populist platform, as Chen points out, is rather hollow when it comes to spelling out strategies for further political and economic development. Still, it can no doubt function at least as a provisional ideological basis of a regime, not least due to its great emotional appeal among the public. As long as the platform retains its force of attraction, it can provide legitimacy at least by default, if no contending ideologies are around to tell a more convincing story.

Chen argues that in comparison with post-Deng China, post-Soviet politics in Russia has been more fluid and in lack of basic stability and continuity. Here I am not sure that I agree. It is all a matter of
Timeframe and perspective. If the focus of the comparison is from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 onwards, then she is definitely right. The Yeltsin presidencies in the 1990s were indeed unstable, inchoate and chaotic, and the Putin era has meant a fundamental departure from its democratizing ambitions, but since late 1999 onwards, the Putin presidencies have for almost 20 years, for better or for worse, provided remarkable stability and consistency to Russian politics.

However, Chen has a major point when she argues that the Russian ideology-building project is highly vulnerable as it fundamentally draws its legitimizing powers from the broad personal popularity of Vladimir Putin. For the potentially contending political elites the president is at present the only leader who is broadly agreeable to all. The fact that political power has become so personalized in Russia and so centered on Putin’s persona creates a deep potential dilemma, as no clear rules of political succession exist in present-day Russia. Also, Tsar Vladimir has not shown any inclinations of identifying a prince as his heir apparent. The present political stability could break up very quickly, should the incumbent depart from the political stage prematurely and outside of the regular electoral cycle, which foresees presidential elections in 2018 and 2024.

The reliance on Putin is the Achilles’ heel of the Russian political system and stands in stark contrast with the situation in China. On the other hand, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017 made it patently clear that President Xi Jinping has strengthened his power position to an extent not witnessed in China since the days of Deng. Even so, the processes of political succession have been smooth and seemingly undramatic ever since the early 1990s, due to the fact that legitimacy and popular mandate largely reside with the party structures and not with the individual incumbents. Power has been institutionalized, not personalized, and that has so far spared Chinese politics from political ruptures during almost three decades.

Cheng Chen has written a solid, well-researched and timely book. It provides a valuable basic background to political developments in post-Soviet Russia and post-Deng China, and identifies both differences and similarities in the political trajectory of the two great powers. She underlines the formidable rallying power of official nationalism in both countries, and describes well how the regimes have managed to draw legitimacy from this basis. At the same time, she discusses how the articulation of such nationalist sentiments could inhibit the formulation of more elaborate strategies for political and economic development. Not least importantly, she points out the predicament inherent in the construction of the personalized as opposed to institutional legitimacy of Vladimir Putin and shows how the lack of clear rules of political succession in contemporary Russia could provide a vexing problem for domestic Russian politics and a major headache for the world outside it.

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