

**Sergei MEDVEDEV, *The Return of the Russian Leviathan* (English Edition).
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019, 286 p.**

Domenico VALENZA

Doctorant

GIES, Ghent University (BE)

UNU-CRIS, United Nations University (BE)

dvalenza@cris.unu.edu

Doi : 10.5077/journals/connexe.2021.e603

“The start of this deadly spiral was laid down on that day in February 2014 with the decision to annex Crimea. Now we are all living in a post-Crimea world”. Sergei Medvedev’s *The Return of the Russian Leviathan* is a fascinating trip through contemporary Russia, covering a diverse range of subjects from the recent political deadlock between Russia and the West to episodes of daily life in Moscow. Sitting at the crossroads between history, politics and sociology, it is a brilliant collection of short essays written in a style that illuminates the darkest stories of the regime with lucidity and sarcasm. If the former is the trademark of the renowned academic —Medvedev is a Professor at the Department of Political Science at the Higher School of Economics, Moscow— the latter highlights his outstanding writing skills. *The Return of the Russian Leviathan* —a reference to Hobbes’s form of state and, no less importantly, to Zvyagintsev’s superb movie— is a story full of bitter irony: as he remarks in his preface of the English edition, “this book is written at the point where historical intuition meets comical intonation, and tragedy meets farce.” Its structure, and particularly the concise nature of the different stories, allows the reader to pause, breath and interrogate the reality of a country that many fail to grasp.

As a historian, Medvedev looks into Russia’s recurring cycles, noting frequent occasions when the country could have chosen freedom but instead always favoured autocracy. This explains why, to understand contemporary Russia, scholars and observers do not need Kissinger’s or Brzezinski’s geopolitical analyses but rather Dostoevsky’s books or Danilevsky’s¹ pamphlets which have consistently shaped the lens through which the Kremlin sees the world. Medvedev’s analysis, however, is by no means deterministic: above all is, as said, a matter of choices. Similarly to what happened to Russia in the past, Medvedev sees Crimea as the point of no return in closing the post-Soviet normalisation era, when Russia made efforts to belong to the global world, and opening a new and final act of autocracy, linking together discourses and symbols from the past. From the times of Ivan the Terrible to Brezhnev days, “the whole history of Russia is being played out once again”.

1 Nikolay Yakovlevich Danilevsky was a 19th century Russian philosopher and an ideologue of Pan-Slavism.

Moving away from the twists and turns of history, Medvedev is also a scrupulous analyst of contemporary Russian discourses. Relying on Carl Schmitt's understanding of politics as a search for enemies, the author offers a poststructuralist explanation of how threats are produced within Russia's administrative machinery: as a "key element of the functioning of the Russian state", threats end up becoming real through this production process. It leads the author to suggest the existence of a "unified guiding logic" behind this systematic production flow. As soon as threats are formulated, authorities can lead their offensive. Following this mechanism, in the preface Medvedev identifies four areas of war being waged by federal authorities, and the book follows this distinction into four chapters.

The "War for Space" is the first notable area of engagement. Here the reference to space does not cover the Cold War race between the United States and the Soviet Union, during which the two superpowers attempted to achieve superior spaceflight capacities. Rather, it addresses what Medvedev calls Russia's post-imperial drama, or the "search for blood and soil" that nationalist groupings have conducted in the post-Soviet era. Looking at the country as an "eternal colonial frontier", Medvedev observes that nationalists are moving away from this heritage in an attempt to build up a new Russian myth. As the war for space also involves knowledge production, in Medvedev's view, geopolitics *à la russe* has become a useful field of study proposing "messianic myths and simulacra as national interests and the struggle for resources." Away from "illusions of territorial acquisition", Medvedev pervasively argues that any convincing "war for space" should take into account environmental protection: from the ecological disasters in the Arctic to the extensive wildfires, sustainable development should be at the top of the authorities' agenda.

In the second part of the book, Medvedev analyses the "War for Symbols", in which signs, symbols and performances have become tools to build "the new Russian awareness". In the continuing production of threats, the outside world becomes a space of challenges, not possibilities, requiring intervention from above. From the Olympic Games to linguistic sovereignty, the offensive for symbolic dominance targets Russia's everyday life. Notable are Medvedev's bittersweet remarks on Moscow, as his affection for the city clashes with the inability to bring himself to love the Kremlin and the Red Square. Depicted as "sacred sites", they evoke "the uncomfortable feeling that nothing is on a human scale" as a result of the distance between the power and the people. Hence, in Medvedev's view, there is a need for a reasonable divorce between the city and the state, configuring the latter in an "Eurasian manner, setting up its new capital somewhere in the Orenburg Steppe" and allowing Moscow to flourish, with the Kremlin becoming "a beautiful historic park, where all the gates are open twenty-four hours a day, like in the Old City in Jerusalem".

Part III, or the "War for the Body", shines as the most convincing section of the book. Drawing on Foucault's biopolitics and Medvedev's previous research on the topic, he analyses this new area of state regulation, where life is no longer a private business but an object that authorities have the duty to secure. As the state identifies the "toxicity" of Western body models and their derivations, it draws a "cordon sanitaire" between the West and the threatened Russian community, and relies on "punitive hygiene" in order

to clean up the social space. Beyond sport and drugs, the “crusade for cleanliness” targets several areas: from Putin’s physical body, which the author sees as intimately connected to the more abstract body of the nation, to the bedroom, with anti-condom discourse and the ban of “homosexual propaganda”, and even the kitchen, with Western cheese as a “marker of the dangerous Other”. On this, Medvedev advances an intriguing explanation of why Russia failed to develop a notable tradition of cheese production. He argues that, as long-aged cheese is “an investment in a reliable future”, stable institutions, ownership rights and credit lines are continuously needed to produce it. This would hence explain the country’s specialisation on tvorog, a quickly manufactured cheese with lower production needs. In a nutshell, to Medvedev, Russia is not a country for old cheese.

In the fourth and final session, Medvedev analyses the “War for Memory”, noting how the regime attempted to create new myths about Russian history –see the cult of Victory Day on 9 May– while other historical figures, such as Gorbachev and Yeltsin, remain heavily contentious. Particularly relevant is the short essay on Ekaterinburg’s Yeltsin centre, an attempt to provide an unusual “image of a different Russia – non-imperial and not run by Moscow”, something that clashes with Russia’s recent return to autocracy. The same critical vein inspires Medvedev’s reflections on Svetlana Alexievich, whose contribution is “a therapy session, an attempt to teach society to listen and to speak about pain.”

One negligible comment about this otherwise fascinating and immersive treatise is the position of the West throughout the book. Whereas in Russian authorities’ playbook the West is consistently framed as an existential threat, at times the book refers to the West’s positions as the (positive) benchmark against which Russia’s domestic and foreign policies are assessed. For instance, Medvedev observes that, contrary to Russia’s contemporary behaviour, in decolonisation processes former empires such as France, Britain or the Netherlands “have demonstrated generosity, having no fear for their gene pool and cultural immunity.” While it is tempting to frame Western former empires in positive terms, one should note that decolonisation debates are still ongoing in these countries –involving also worrying far-right positions on decolonisation and multiculturalism– and that, perhaps more worryingly, colonial legacies still haunt former colonised territories and populations.

In a similar vein, Medvedev discusses the achievements of Western post-industrial societies, where “an atmosphere that is multinational and tolerant and allows for sexual freedom encourages the flowering of entrepreneurism, innovation and creativity”. Although many would not question the benefits of a tolerant work setting, this picture leaves out perhaps less liberal but equally innovative realities, as is the case in China, Singapore or other non-Western economies. Overall, the author convincingly advocates against binary structures because they lead to self-destruction, but some observations seem to re-affirm them, as they shape a world view with, on the one hand, Western actors for good (and Russia declining the possibility to belong to this group) and, on the other hand, “global scarecrows and their allies”.

This marginal observation, however, does not question in any way the excellent quality of this book. Medvedev's *The Return of the Russian Leviathan* is a highly recommended read for scholars of international relations and of post-Soviet countries and cultures. With a brilliant analysis of Russian contemporary society and an insightful depiction of its political regime, the book is a must to anyone who is willing to grasp Russia's recent conservative wave.

Open Access Publications - Bibliothèque de l'Université de Genève
Creative Commons Licence 4.0

