Review – To Run the World

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CONSTANTINE PLESHAKOV, JAN 20 2025

To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power
By Sergey Radchenko
Cambridge University Press, 2024

It just so happened that Sergey Radchenko's book, an oeuvre that took years to write, reached the reader in the third year of Russia's war against Ukraine. To sum up the idea of the book in just a few words, it is about the defining role of the struggle for recognition in world affairs, and this is highly applicable to the 2022 aggression directed by Vladimir Putin, supported by the majority of the citizens of the Russian Federation. I would go as far as to say that this is the only explanation that makes sense. No economic gains could be expected from annexing the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson provinces of Ukraine, and no strategic benefits either — and had Russia won, the domestic effects of the "little victorious war" would've been too short-lived to justify the costs of victory.

In the final section of the book, Radchenko suggests that a proper metaphor for Putin's war follies would be the crimes of Rodion Raskolnikov, who commits murder to assert his "right" to do as he wants (p.602). I wouldn't be surprised if a Dostoyevsky scholar finds the allusion unsatisfactory, because in the novel, Raskolnikov's evil deeds eventually lead to redemption, but since many people view *Crime and Punishment* as being about a man who kills old ladies just because he can, I would argue that Radchenko's metaphor stands.

Of course, one can't write about struggle for recognition without referencing the Hegelian school, and Radchenko promptly brings up Francis Fukuyama — however, the reader would've benefitted from a closer, in-depth look at the Hegel/Kojeve tradition, which, in Fukuyama's words (2006, p.144), is a "non-materialistic historical dialectic." Its basic postulate is that a human "is a fundamentally other-directed and social animal, but his sociability leads him not into a peaceful civil society, but into a violent struggle to the death for pure prestige," (Fukuyama, 2006, p.147) and Radchenko's book relies on this very supposition. However, Hegel's "human" is not static, and the "first man" would change (hence why Fukuyama used "last man" in the title of his seminal book). I think it's fair to argue that in this respect, we see remarkable stasis in the Kremlin, and it would have been fascinating to read Radchenko's thoughts on that.

In general, I am left with the impression that in *To Run the World*, I saw two different book ideas wrestling for space and attention. One is an interpretive history (ambition and hurt pride as the driving forces of the Kremlin policies), and the other is a narrative history of the Cold War: thorough, well documented, and presenting the Cold War as a global system with several war theatres. The author calls it a "very long book" that covers some of the "well-known ground" (p.11). It is, and it does, and I am not persuaded that either was necessary.

I think I won't be mistaken saying that the interpretive part (from Dostoyevsky to Fukuyama) is the most exciting thread in the book for the author. That is how it appears to me as a reader. But interpretation inevitably gets diluted along the way, and this is unsurprising, given the epic proportions of the volume. Choosing just several case studies to support the author's vision (for example, the Yalta Conference for Stalin, the Cuban missile crisis for Khrushchev, détente for Brezhnev) would've worked really well, keeping the book ergonomic in purpose and shape.

That said, I still think this would be a good book to use in a Cold War course: I have already mentioned that, unlike so

many of us, Radchenko is not Eurocentric and treats war theatres outside North Atlantic with all the due diligence. Another positive about the book is its voice: it is a witty, reader-friendly text.

We as readers are very fortunate that Sergey Radchenko wrote a book reintroducing struggle for recognition, or battle for pure prestige, together with "pride" and "ambition" into the conversation about conflict and war. In my opinion, it would be fascinating to read Radchenko's book-length interpretation of Russia's foreign policy since 1991. Take NATO eastward expansion, for example. If applying the struggle for recognition approach (and I think we should), Russia reacted to the expansion so furiously, not because there were any real security concerns (it was absurd to suggest that NATO would attack Russia from the territory of Poland or Estonia), but because Moscow felt left out — everyone else in Eastern Europe (with the notable exception of Russia's ally Belarus) was invited to join the core institution of the West, while Russia was not.

The last paragraph of Radchenko's book reads: "A more diverse — "multipolar" – world, with many more actors throwing their weight about was, for Putin, vastly preferable to a world run from Washington. This would result in a chaotic situation, sure. But chaos creates opportunities for the daring. Perhaps, with the right combination of chutzpah and good luck, Russia could one day recover its illusive greatness and its unsatiable, self-destructive ambition to run the world" (p.603). I would disagree with using the word "chaos" to describe the uncertainties of a multipolar world ("anarchy" would be a better term), but the question Radchenko asks is a good one, and as the war in Ukraine has definitely made the multipolarity stronger, there are now more opportunities for the daring.

References

Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 2006.

About the author:

Constantine Pleshakov is the author of six books on revolution and war. His most recent book is*The Crimean Nexus: Putin's War and the Clash of Civilizations.* He teaches at Amherst College.