Origins of Russian Archaization and Strategies to Combat it

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Abstract

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Introduction

The country is rapidly engulfed by a wave of archaization. In economics, this is reflected in the return to "understood deals," reminiscent of practices seemingly left behind in the 1990s. In social sciences, we observe a retreat to forgotten scholastic methods, unused for 200 or even 300 years. Family life is becoming regulated by sets of rules reminiscent of the patriarchal Domostroy manual.

If we analyze Russia's history over the past centuries, we find that this turn toward archaization is nothing fundamentally new. For the last two centuries, Russia has remained a country with preserved archaic relations. Before the First World War, it was primarily an agrarian country where 85% of the population lived in rural areas, and the majority endured extremely low living standards. Most citizens survived by striving to depend as little as possible on the state, residing in their closed communal world where everything outside—officials, the army, and international politics—seemed like an alien external addition.

A Country Without Growth

Poor peasants mainly lived traditional lifestyles. Their worldview and attitudes toward life were steeped in archaic principles, rooted in centuries-old practices and a meager level of income. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, bread, potatoes, and dairy products made up about 85% of the Russian peasant's diet.

According to recent studies, from 1690 to 1880, Russia's real GDP per capita barely grew (Figure 1). People lived at or just above subsistence levels, leaving almost no resources to build systems of rationing or market distribution. Only from 1880 did incomes start to rise slightly, granting society a slim chance to create institutions. Yet, a few decades of growth were insufficient to lay the groundwork for a fully developed market economy. The small layer of educated people could not influence the vast numbers of impoverished, semi-literate peasants who made up the majority of the population. This situation was exacerbated by the vast distances within the country, where reaching remote areas could take weeks or even months.

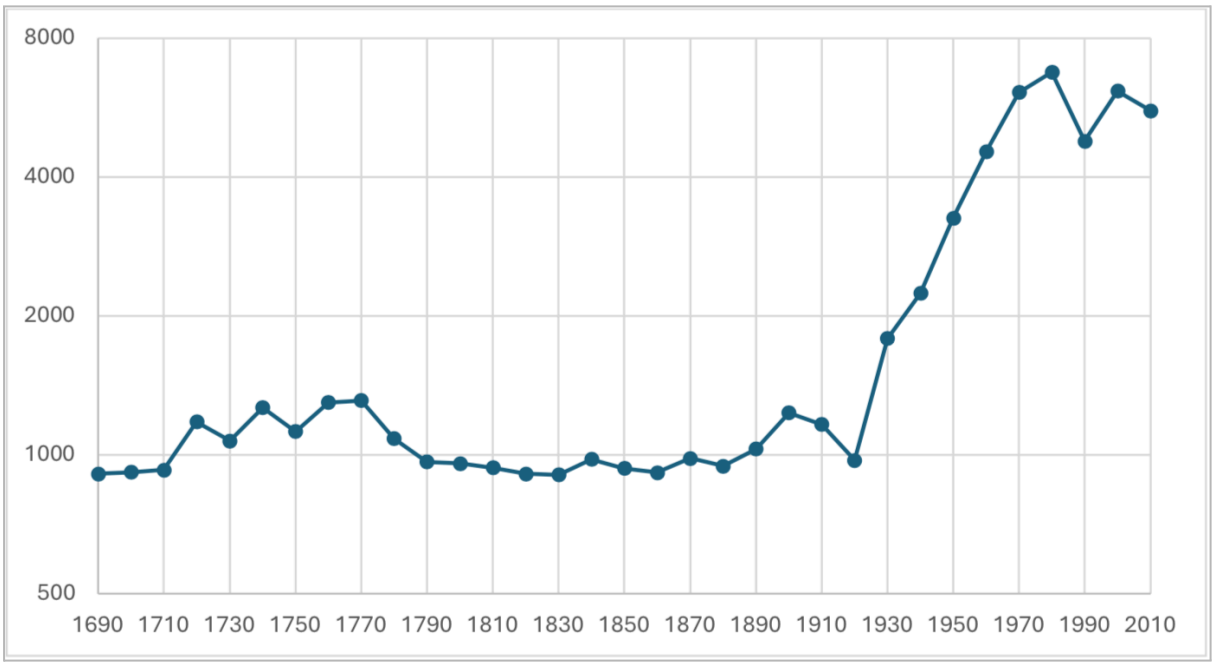

Figure 1. Russia's GDP per capita, 1690–2010s, in 1990 USD[1].

Even in 1913, the European part of Russia lagged in population density compared to most Western countries of the early 18th century. A small educated class had formed only in a few major cities. Literacy levels followed a similar pattern. Census data from 1897 shows high literacy rates near the capitals and in regions such as Poland, Finland, and the modern Baltic states.

[1]Catching-up and Falling Behind: Russian Economic Growth, 1690s-1880s, Stephen Broadberry, Elena Korchmina, July 2022, Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR).

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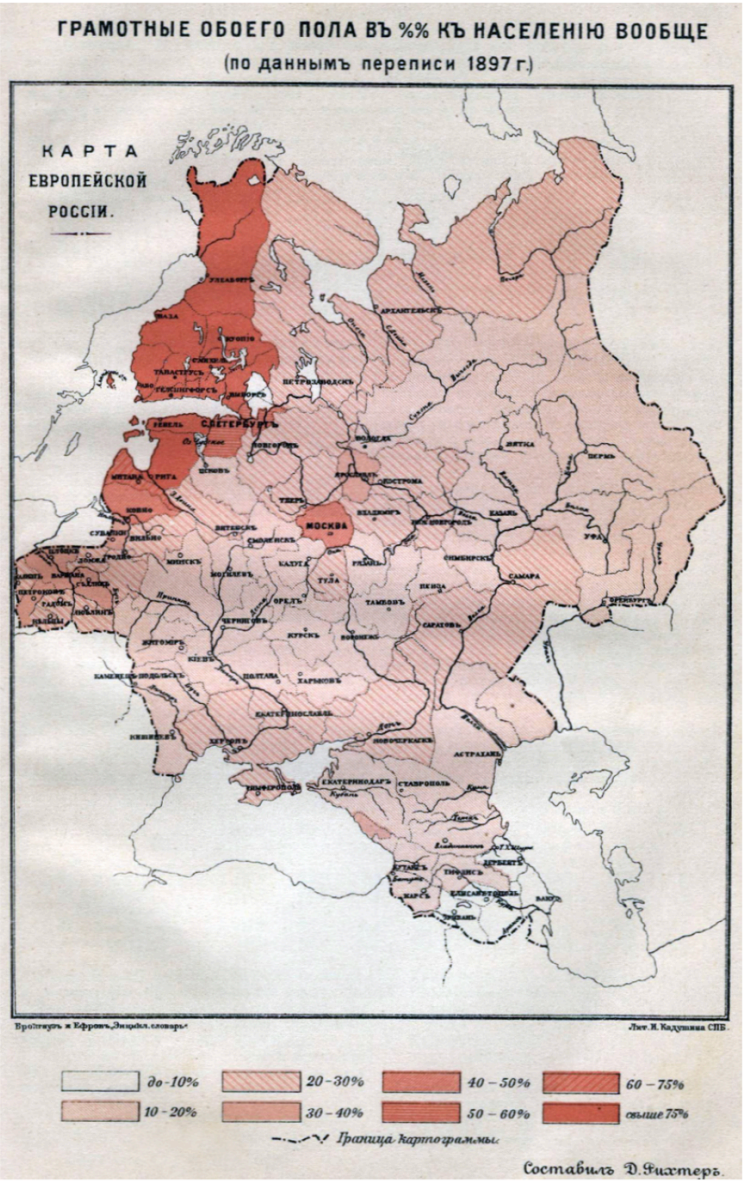

Figure 2. Literacy level of European part of Russia in 1897[2].

The war that began in 1914 brought severe economic and social consequences. On the one hand, the economy saw an increase in command-administrative management. On the other hand, the shadow economy expanded significantly, reviving and developing archaic exchange methods.

Provinces were flooded with hundreds of thousands of refugees; by late 1916, over 2.5 million refugees resided in European Russia alone.

[2] Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary. Add. Vol. IIA.

Massive human and financial costs during wartime left many on the brink of survival. Sociologist Pitirim Sorokin attributed the revolution to the disruption of basic human instincts, such as the need for food and survival.

The February Revolution enabled this large mass of people with archaic mindsets to influence the country's destiny. These individuals, recent peasants, formed the fertile ground inspired by the political teachings of Marxists, Socialist-Revolutionaries, and anarchists, rising to fight for their perceived rights.

"We Shall Build Our New World…"

The immediate result of the revolution was the dismantling of functioning societal mechanisms. Day by day, people worked, swept streets, baked bread, attended schools and universities, and caught criminals. The revolution disrupted the familiar system of coordinates where livelihoods came from the state, a stable market, or one's household. The breakdown of repeated processes— analyzed in game theory—quickly destroyed the fragile layers of market and state mechanisms, leaving only archaic institutions focused on primary survival.

The state system finally collapsed in 1917 after the Bolsheviks seized power. The Civil War began, triggering mass migration. Estimates suggest 1.5 to 3 million people left the country. Most migrants were educated city dwellers with gymnasium or university backgrounds, not peasants or workers.

After the revolution, individuals attempted to create institutions to organize the country's functioning. The revolution, while destroying the old world, also eliminated many barriers—class, religious, and national—hindering development. Consequently, the most dynamic economic period occurred during the post-Civil War recovery. Within seven years (1921–1928), Russia's economy nearly returned to pre-war levels across most industrial indicators. Three factors contributed: the removal of imperial restrictions (e.g., class and gender limitations on education, abolition of the Pale of Settlement, and conditions for social mobility), recovery growth, and the New Economic Policy (NEP), which limited state interference in the economy. Additionally, the acquisition of foreign technologies, lasting until the mid-1930s, played a role, with many factories purchased turnkey from the West or built with European engineers' involvement.

However, in any economy, the primary source of investment funds is individual savings. For the Bolsheviks, the only way to obtain these funds was through de facto expropriation. The NEP ended, but with it collapsed the nascent market

economy. By 1927/28, a rationing system had to be introduced first for bread, then for other goods. Rationing ended only in 1934. Yet this did not improve living standards. Studies show that by 1937, consumption's share of GDP fell more than 30% compared to 1928. Thus, despite GDP growth, consumption barely reached pre-revolutionary levels.

Uneven distribution existed not only vertically (from poor to rich) but also geographically. In 1939–40, over 40% of meat and meat products transported by rail went to just two cities—Moscow and Leningrad.

The majority of people in Russia at this time could sustain themselves only through illegal means of income. Fake ration cards, underground trading, and selling art objects helped people survive. Essentially, most of the population relied on archaic methods of distribution to get by.

Archaization Returns

The reinforcement of archaization was facilitated by the extremely low level of education in the country. Educated individuals were the ones who emigrated, and those who stayed were constrained by strict ideological frameworks. Of course, the new scientific and educational systems were more progressive, at least in that they allowed the majority of people to receive education. Nevertheless, the most educated strata of society—officials, nobles, merchants—were excluded from the educational system and could neither enhance their knowledge nor share it with others. They were replaced in the cities by peasants. Between 1938 and 1939 alone, the urban population increased by 20% (Naselenie SSSR, 1973. Statisticheskij sbornik, 1975.).

Meanwhile, the number of students grew at a staggering pace, unsupported by quality school education or adequate teaching staff. From 1928 to 1940, the number of students in the country increased fivefold. Naturally, the quality of training for such specialists dropped sharply. The low qualifications of this growing mass of graduates hindered efforts to reduce archaization in society. This process was further exacerbated by mass repressions, which, combined with poor education quality, led to enormous losses during World War II. Marshal Timoshenko wrote in 1940: "The training of command staff in military schools is unsatisfactory due to inadequate programs, disorganized classes, insufficient utilization of study time, and especially weak field practical training." (Iz akta …. 1990)

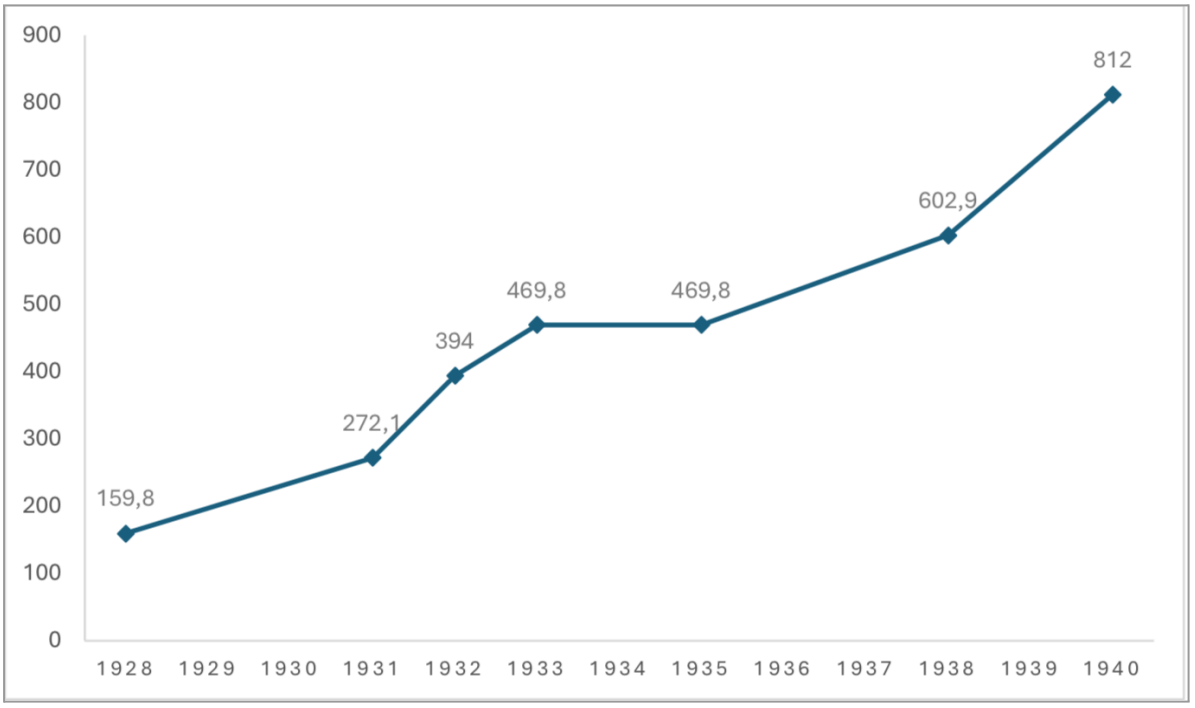

Figure 3. Change in the number of students in the USSR (1928-1940)[3].

With the onset of World War II, the country once again descended into terrible poverty. At this time, most of the population, relying neither on the market nor the state, survived by any means possible, often criminal.

The tragedy of the siege of Leningrad is well known, where survival was possible only if one had an additional, often illegal, source of food. Experts and blockade survivors alike estimate that it was impossible to stay alive solely on rationed products. However, this issue was not unique to Leningrad. According to modern research, in Arkhangelsk, far from the front lines, 38,000 people—nearly one-fifth of the pre-war population—died from hunger and disease between 1941 and 1944.

Archaization as a Growth Disease

Post-war life, gradual productivity growth, and the emergence of new technologies, including those borrowed from the West during the war, led to a slow improvement in income levels by the mid-1960s to early 1970s. This improvement created a layer

[3] SSSR v cifrah [v 1934 godu] : [kratkij sbornik statisticheskih materialov] / Centr. upr. nar.- hoz. ucheta Gosplana SSSR. - M. : Soyuzorguchet, 1934. SSSR v cifrah v 1981 godu. – M.: Finansy i statistika, 1982.

of individuals engaged in intellectual labor. In 1962, the urban population of the USSR exceeded the rural population for the first time. By 1969, more children were born in cities than in rural areas. Urbanization proceeded so rapidly that the urban population doubled between 1939 and 1969. This coincided with a significant increase in the number of students. From 1950 to 1970, the student population doubled every ten years.

As in the pre-war years, such explosive growth in higher education infrastructure led to a decline in the already modest qualifications of graduates. Of course, there were strong faculties and excellent scientists, but the average Soviet university graduate was poorly prepared, especially in social sciences, remaining captive to archaic thinking.

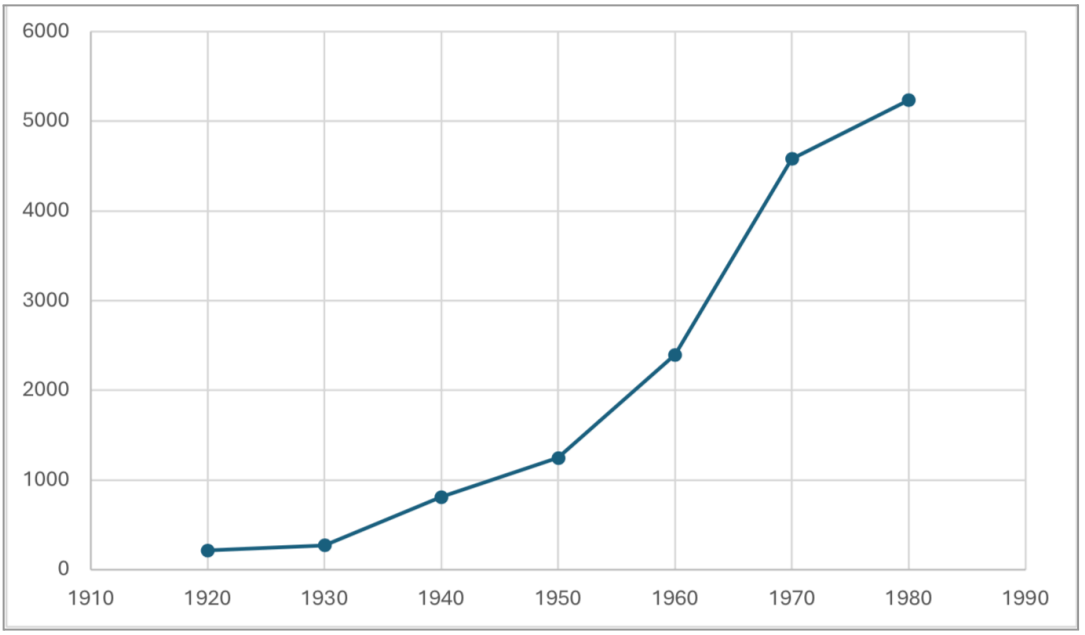

Figure 4. Change in the number of students in the USSR (1928-1940)[4].

Possibly, had life continued to improve, income levels in the country might have risen within one or two generations to levels sufficient for development, forming a new, adequately educated elite. However, this did not come to pass.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed under the weight of accumulated errors and external circumstances. Simultaneously, Russia, now an independent state, began a rapid and often coercive transition to a market economy. As with the transition to a

[4] SSSR v cifrah [v 1934 godu] : [kratkij sbornik statisticheskih materialov] / Centr. upr. nar.- hoz. ucheta Gosplana SSSR. - M. : Soyuzorguchet, 1934. SSSR v cifrah v 1985 godu (Kratkij statisticheskij sbornik). – M., "Finansy i Statistika", 1986.

planned economy, this process was accompanied by a sharp decline in living standards, the closure of enterprises, unemployment, emigration, rising crime, and a loss of life's bearings.

Modern Challenges of Archaization

The sharp decline in the prestige of science and engineering professions led to a mass exodus of highly qualified specialists into business or emigration. The lack of demand for engineering expertise deprived the economy of an entire generation of engineers. In the early 1990s, enterprises swiftly dismissed young specialists, as work was only sufficient for experienced practitioners.

The rise in crime and corruption largely resulted from the collapse of long-term social relationships. History repeated itself as in 1917, when short-term deals encouraged deceit, crime, and personal gain. This was compounded by the deeply entrenched archaic worldview permeating the country. The army, security services, agriculture, and interpersonal relations all bore an archaic imprint. In such conditions, the disintegration of the state solidified archaic practices and complicated interactions between market mechanisms and informal agreements.

Officials raised in the Soviet Union's "understood" management practices easily connected with "brotherhoods" operating similarly and with security services that functioned with an unwritten caste system.

As in the 1920s, this breakdown accompanied a decline in educational quality. The unregulated education market initially led to a surge in the number of universities, followed by a dramatic increase in student enrollment.

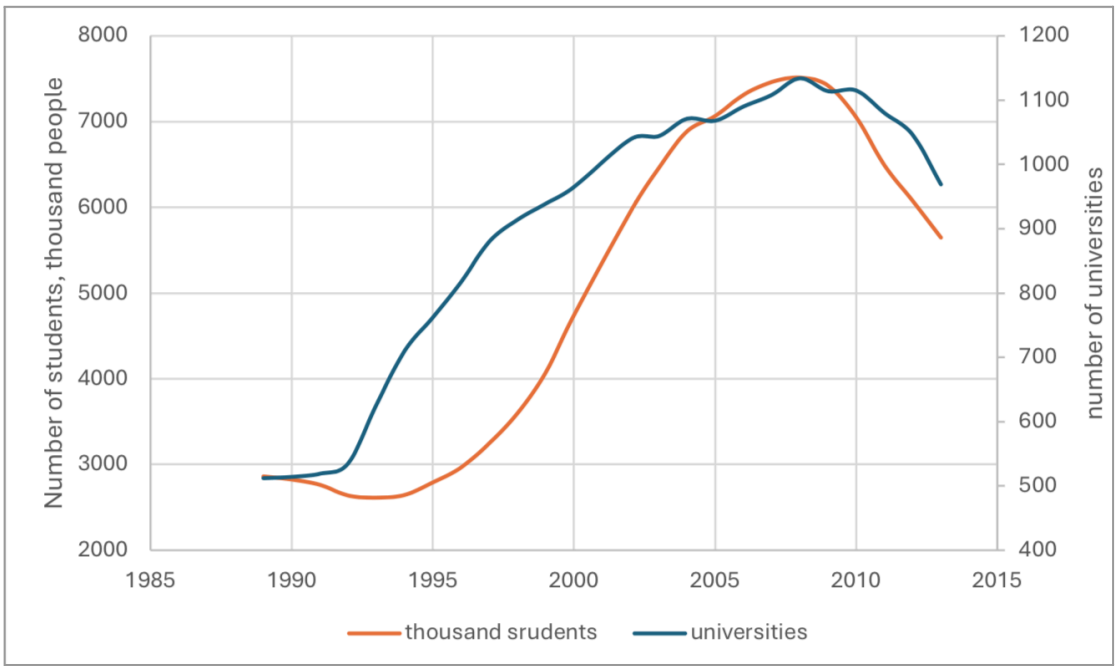

Figure 5. Change in the number of students and universities in Russia (1990-2013)[5].

An unexpected rise in oil prices, bolstered by market reforms, enabled unprecedented income growth for the population but also entrenched societal practices based on informal agreements. Economic growth once again fostered the emergence of an intellectual class. Science, journalism, and internationally recognized universities began to develop. However, much of the elite remained trapped in archaic patterns, dismissing innovations in music, science, business, and education.

Archaic tendencies persisted among the broader population, reinforced by significant inequality. According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), from 1989 to 2016, Russian incomes grew by an average of 70%. However, 23% of the population saw income growth well above the average, while 13% of the poorest did not return to their 1989 income levels. The majority benefited from reforms, but gains were below the national average, with the top 23% reaping the most rewards (Figure 6).

[5] Rossijskij statisticheskij ezhegodnik 2003. – M., Goskomstat Rossii, 2003. Rossijskij statisticheskij ezhegodnik 2014. – M., Goskomstat Rossii, 2014. The Future of Archaization.

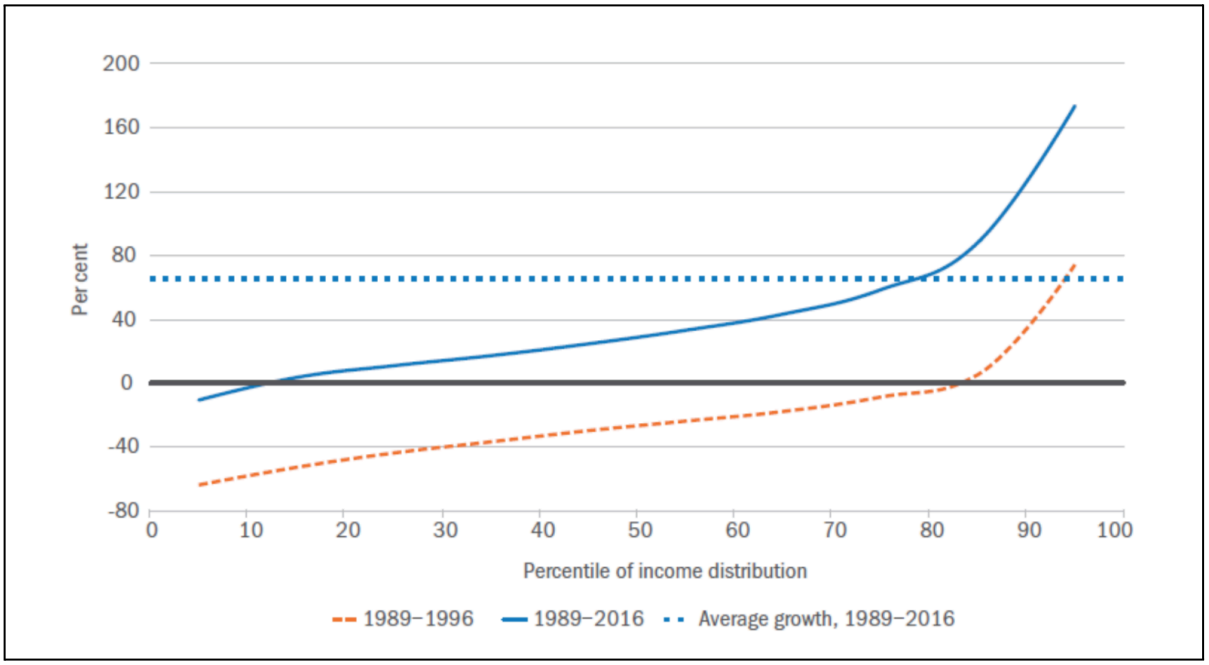

Figure 6. Russia: Aggregate Income Growth Since 1989 by Initial Income Level[6]

The persistence of low income levels preserved archaic business practices, paternalism, and power-based relations in many regions. Despite modernization efforts, significant social stratification left a relatively closed caste of young managers controlling resource sectors, hindering generational renewal. This group, largely composed of Soviet-era elites, security officials, and 1990s businessmen, obstructed new talent.

In an informational vacuum created by the authorities and relying on the archaic thinking of much of the population, leadership decisions prioritized power retention. One key strategy involved leveraging the most archaic segments of society, which supported governance reminiscent of the Soviet Union and Tsarist Russia.

Many dissatisfied with this archaic style of governance found themselves marginalized, unable to sustain their professions. Some emigrated, others joined state service, while others withdrew into internal exile.

Amid economic militarization, limited access to modern technologies, and a declining population, Russia faces a new economic downturn. This will likely reinforce archaic behaviors and deepen the gap with developed countries. While modern Russian society is far less archaic than it was half a century ago, the open

[6] EBRD, 2016.

information age of the 21st century offers hope. Resources for creating an isolated system akin to the USSR of the 1930s-50s no longer exist. Thus, Russian citizens will eventually have an opportunity to undertake a new modernization project.

Strategy to Reduce Archaization in Russia

The success of this project will require substantial changes in education, income redistribution policies, and the establishment of permanent social mobility mechanisms. Breaking free from archaic thinking will be slow and gradual, potentially spanning decades. Economists believe recovery from an anticipated future economic downturn could exacerbate inequality, delaying societal progress beyond archaic patterns.

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Nikolay Kulbaka is a seasoned economist and academic with a PhD in Economics from the Central Economics and Mathematics Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He has held teaching positions at prominent institutions, including the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Dmitry Pozharsky University, and Irkutsk State University. Nikolay's professional journey also includes research roles at the Institute of Program Systems and marketing leadership positions in Moscow-based companies. An active contributor to academic and public discourse, he has published extensively on economics, history, and policy. Forced to relocate due to political pressures, he is now seeking opportunities in a supportive and open academic environment.