

REVIEW ESSAY

Developments in Russian Politics 8. Eds. Stephen White, Richard Sakwa, and Henry E. Hale. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. xx, 300 pp. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. Figures. Tables. Maps. \$94.95, Hard bound.

Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia. By Samuel A. Greene. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. xii, 276 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Figures. Tables. Index. \$29.95, paper.

No Illusions: The Voices of Russia's Future Leaders. By Ellen Mickiewicz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 255 pp. Appendixes. Notes. Index. \$29.95, hard bound.

Over the previous 15 years, Vladimir Putin has presided over a significant reworking of the political and economic rules of the game, reshuffling the elite that design and enforce those rules, and reasserting Russia's position on the global stage by ignoring or rewriting existing international norms and laws of diplomacy. This revision of state authority was accomplished by simultaneously weakening key mechanisms of vertical and horizontal accountability, leaving few formal and informal checks on power. At the same time, President Putin's approval ratings remain at high levels, particularly in the wake of his recent foreign policy actions in Ukraine and Syria. For those hoping to alter this increasingly authoritarian and belligerent trajectory, the source of the opportunity for change is unclear. Are there actors at the domestic or international level who could rewrite the rules that now govern the political and economic system? Will other factors, such as declining economic performance, changing cultural values, or shifting geopolitical dynamics, ultimately weaken support for the regime?

These three books, in different ways, all provide a rich, nuanced view of how and why Russia has changed since the first tumultuous decade of post-Soviet reform, and what these changes might imply for Russia's future. *Developments in Russian Politics 8* provides a broad but detailed overview of Russia's evolution in the Putin era. *No Illusions: The Voices of Russia's Future Leaders* takes the reader into the innermost thoughts of Russia's future elite decision makers, and *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia* analyzes the view from below by dissecting citizens' successful and unsuccessful attempts to organize collectively. These works illustrate the complexities of the Russian polity and political system in ways that counter popular media images of Russia as a country governed by an all-powerful, paranoid and vindictive leader returning his country to the Soviet era. Certainly, there is some truth to these sensationalized pictures, if not much wisdom. There are some very significant impediments to the reform of the current rules of the game, and it will take more than a change in presidential leadership to restore patterns of pluralism and norms and practices of accountability in the future.

The chapters in *Developments in Russian Politics 8* offer a concise, but comprehensive overview of Russia's current place in the world, and how it got

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there in the post-Yeltsin era. An impressive collection of prominent scholars provide detailed analyses of the critical institutions that comprise the Russian state, the wider relationships between the Russian state and its citizens, and specific policy formulations regarding the economy, foreign relations, defense, and security. The volume's introduction and conclusion place Russia in historical perspective and outline hypothetical future trajectories. Cumulatively, the chapters portray a system which has permitted the Russian leadership to centralize power in the previous fifteen years while simultaneously weakening pluralism and removing mechanisms of accountability. There are very few ways by which citizens can influence the state, and most of the institutions—the legislature, the courts, and the media—that could mount a challenge to the authority of the presidency are now under its thumb. If democracy is best defined as a system which has definite rules and indefinite outcomes, the regime in Russia can best be described in reverse: while the rules are frequently rewritten and unevenly applied, the outcome is never in doubt—"the regime knows best" (15). Thus, as Vladimir Gel'man notes in his concluding chapter, Russia represents a new strand of authoritarianism known as the "competitive," or "electoral" authoritarian regime: multicandidate elections support the regime's claim to legitimacy, but the playing field is so uneven that the regime's grip on power is never truly threatened. This status quo, while unfavorable to the majority of Russia's citizens, is nonetheless relatively durable, for it works to the benefit of the small group of elites that maintains power. During the Putin years of leadership, Russian citizens have been relatively quiescent, bestowing loyalty in exchange for stability.

Despite the spate of protests in 2011 and 2012, there are few scenarios which would result in renegotiating the current status quo. As Richard Sakwa notes in his introduction, "it will take an active citizenry and political pressure from below and courage from the leadership to ensure that the promise of Russia's democratic development is fulfilled" (18). Yet, Vladimir Gel'man's thoughtful, concluding chapter demonstrates why Russia's leaders may not find that courage: the institutional rules of the game have been structured in such a way as to make it very difficult for that type of leadership to emerge. The following two books provide different perspectives on whether that leadership might exist in the future elite, or whether an active citizenry can organize to provide that kind of pressure from below. Both books, in different ways, demonstrate that the current conditions are not favorable.

No Illusions: The Voices of Russia's Future Leaders, by Ellen Mickiewicz, takes us into the minds of Russia's future elite. This book explores the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of students from three of Russia's top universities, institutions that often feed their graduates into powerful jobs in the commanding heights of politics and/or business. In the spring of 2011, 108 students were divided into twelve focus groups that met over a two-hour period, responding to a number of conversation prompts regarding international relations, neighboring countries, domestic and international media, domestic movements, and the Russian government.

What does this snapshot reveal about the attitudes and worldviews of Russia's potential future decision makers? Those hoping that a young, highly educated post-Soviet generation would possess radically different political

ideals from the elite currently exercising the levers of power will find both affirmation and disappointment in the book's findings. These young elite do differ, but not in ways that foster optimism regarding Russia's democratic future or pro-western orientation. In terms of Russia's place in the world, the competitive dynamic of the Cold War is still a salient cognitive frame for university students: they view the United States as Russia's main competitor. However, America's once-vaunted soft power, or ability to shape Russians' attitudes and preferences through example rather than force or coercion, has declined precipitously. Though these students view the US as the leading nation in the world, they are deeply cynical about a country they perceive to be aggressive, arrogant, hostile, and expansionist.

The students have not transferred their disapproval to the Putin regime or the politicians who currently wield influence, however. While they are scornful of current politicians, they are not interested in expressing that scorn via the ballot box. Nor do protest politics capture their imagination; few displayed empathy for, connection to, or interest in the protests over the destruction of the Khimki forest, which were unfolding at the time. Further, while they spend hours a day on the internet, it has mainly increased their access to multiple sources of information, allowing them to compare and evaluate the reliability of this information, without having bolstered their sense of agency or connection to others. Perhaps this is because they are also wary of trusting most others, viewing trust as a risky process with theoretical benefits but with more pitfalls than rewards in practice.

While the focus groups were conducted before the Bolotnaia Square protests, Mickiewicz details in the final chapters how the fallout from the protests irrevocably has "changed the Russia into which the focus group participants must make their way" (172). New laws governing rights to assemble and NGO registration, among others, make it even more difficult for interest groups to express their concerns publicly. At the same time, grassroots efforts to organize protesters into a more coherent social movement ultimately failed, as the coalition of groups joined in opposition to the regime splintered into competing factions, unable to compromise. Difficulties with trust apparently extend beyond the future elite.

The chapters paint a picture of a generation of youth that is deeply attached to Russia, but not to those Russians who make the decisions that govern their lives. Their anger about the quality of current political institutions does not translate into proactive ideas for change. If we are waiting for reform to come from liberalizers from within, there is no sign from the evidence surveyed here that it will be forthcoming from Russian students poised to take positions of power and responsibility.

If the impetus for change is unlikely to emerge in the future elite, what about the mass of Russia's 140 million plus citizens? In *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*, Samuel A. Greene explores the relationship between the governed and the governing in Putin's Russia, presenting a grassroots perspective of Russian politics. Previous research on civil society in Russia finds that it is alive but unwell; civic groups seem unable to mobilize public opinion, the public itself is apathetic, and the state has erected a number of barriers that make organization more difficult. *Moscow*

in Movement focuses on the exceptions to these generalizations. Greene explores three cases in which Russians did mobilize in order to understand why they did not do so at other times. Noting that civil society requires action and interaction between the state and society, Greene turns his focus on the relationship between these two components as an explanation for understanding citizen mobilization around political interests. In sum, civil society requires a state against which to react, and collective action emerges in response to a concerted and coherent intrusion by the state into the lives of its citizens, as evidenced in Russia by the massive protests unleashed in 2006 by the policy changes monetizing benefits. Collective action consolidates into a prolonged movement when the state provides stable rules of play and follows a coherent strategy of engagement. As one can imagine, given these conditions, mobilization in Russia is the exception, not the rule. The state has spent the previous two plus decades removing itself from people's lives; overlapping economic and political elites were able to leverage natural resource wealth to enrich themselves and sever bonds of vertical accountability to citizens. It simultaneously discouraged organized opposition with its arsenal of tactics of cooptation, impediments, attacks, and government-funded replacements. Tighter restrictions on the registration and oversight of NGOs, smear campaigns against individual organizations, and generous funding for government organized NGOs such as the youth group Nashi were part of the government's increasingly sophisticated repertory of civic management. This creates an overall scenario in which "Russian citizens are citizens in name only: they enjoy no real ownership of the state they inhabit" (60). The three case studies—a human rights defense, a housing rights movement, and motorist protests—illustrate how variations in state behavior shaped the emergence and consolidation of civic activism. In the first case, a traditional human rights NGO was successful in defending clients' rights in individual cases, but unsuccessful in addressing more systemic issues. Various housing rights movements were able to generate pressure on the state but were unable to sustain their collective action. Finally, the motorist protests grew into the only grassroots movement of the three cases capable of exerting consistent policy pressure on the state. They were successful primarily because the state, in threatening the rights of drivers as a group, provided the impetus for citizens to mobilize; once the state engaged with the movement, it served as something against which the movement could consolidate its aims. The overall message is that Russian citizens are capable of collective action; it is Russia's politics of uncertainty that often blocks their organizational potential.

These three books fill different types of gaps in our knowledge, even as each book leaves some questions unanswered or raises ones that cannot be resolved within the scope of the study. *Developments in Russian Politics 8* is written primarily to provide an empirical overview of Russian politics as well as provide an analysis of what the information means. It will be appealing to anyone searching for a relatively crisp, yet extensive account of Russia's incomplete and contradictory process of political and economic reform since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with a focus on the Putin era. As such, it would serve as an excellent foundational text for a Russian politics course. There are several aspects which make it particularly effective. One is nuance. The Putin

years are not treated as a monolithic era; the chapters convey how and why Russian institutions have changed during the various iterations of Putin's rule as President and Prime Minister and how these shifting institutional arrangements have become entrenched over time. The book also excels at dissecting various elements of Russia's competitive authoritarian regime, countering the more simplistic view of the Russian state as a monolithic regime led by a single puppet master. Thus, the chapters on the executive, parliamentary politics, the rule of law, the Russian media, and political parties, effectively portray both the narrowed abilities for these institutions to demand accountability, yet outline the spaces in which they have to maneuver. In turn, these trends are connected to the chapters on specific policy formation and outcomes, particularly with regard to economic and foreign policy. The volume also emphasizes key political science frameworks to interpret the evolution of Russian politics. In sum, what is valuable about the book is that it discusses Russian politics in such a way that students of political science can think of Russia in comparative perspective, and thus identify its singular aspects as well as the ways in which it mirrors the behaviors of other competitive authoritarian regimes.

In terms of breadth of coverage, while *Developments in Russian Politics 8* addresses most of the essential subject matter, occasionally, there is some overlap; for example, the chapters on civil society and social divisions cover some of the same material on the crackdown on NGOs. At the same time, other themes are overlooked; gender issues and social policy more generally receive short shrift, although the discussion of women in the military is fascinating. Nor does religion, as either a social or a political institution, receive much attention in this latest edition. While these themes may not be worthy of separate chapters, their salience could be integrated more systematically into existing chapters.

In contrast to the substantive breadth of *Developments in Russian Politics 8*, the contribution of *No Illusions* is its detailed and complex portrait of one small but important slice of Russian society, compiled by skillfully weaving together comments to reconstruct the relatively unguarded world views of the next generation of decision makers. In general, it is difficult to collect unvarnished impressions from political and economic elite. This is probably even more so in Russia, where an increased rhetoric of hostility to Western powers narrows that opportunity and access even further. If one believes that effective foreign policy rests, in part, in understanding the mindset of the elite of another country, then this book helps portray the challenges encountered by the first generation to have no memory of life under communism or of the Cold War. The picture drawn for us contains many surprises that do not bode well for Russia's future, however. The mirror Mickiewicz holds up to her subjects reflects a group of students in some ways badly prepared to help Russia assume its place in the world in the 21st century. They poorly understand the countries that will be vital to Russia's future as well as Russia's relative position of power in the global community. If they have democratic ideals, they are unlikely to turn them into action against the very leadership they will join. This seems to be a recipe for muddling along in terms of policy design and implementation for Russia's near future.

On the one hand, one of the strengths of *No Illusions* is that the students' views are allowed to speak for themselves, often with minimal interference from the author. There is no attempt to shoehorn the comments into a theoretical framework. At times, however, the reader would like more guidance from the significant expertise Mickiewicz has developed through the course of her extensive research career. Often, it is up to the reader to think about the broader implications for Russia's future, and some readers may want more direction. More context would also be helpful; while the book portrays a fascinating glimpse into the hearts and minds of a slice of Russia's youth, it is hard to know how representative this glimpse is, and how transitory. Weaving in some additional survey data, which is readily available, would help the reader compare the thoughts of this slice of society with other important social groupings and distinguish between passing moods versus deep seeded tendencies. Nonetheless, this is a fascinating, if sobering view of the post-Putin generation of leadership.

Finally, *Moscow in Movement* provides theoretically informed analysis to look at old assumptions in new ways. Substantively, it covers new ground, as previous studies of Russian civil society have focused on single social movements (the environmental movement or the women's movement), or one aspect of civil society (such as the formal nonprofit sphere). *Moscow in Movement* captures a much more comprehensive view of the range of repertoires of protest along a number of issues as well as the impact these have on the state. The book truly comes alive when it relays the thoughts and experiences of Russian activists, particularly those involved in the motorist protests. Drawing from over 800 posts to various conversation threads for an online forum, Greene's portrayal of the individuals engaged in the struggle over drivers' rights is gripping and highlights how, under certain circumstances, Russian citizens defy the commonly held view that they are inactive, apathetic or distrustful. Further, this book advances what we know about how, why and under what conditions citizens turn individualized complaints into group grievances by comparing diverging levels of mobilization and outcomes through the prism of state-society interaction. One minor observation is that the book moves from examples of failed collective action to successful mobilization. These events, in turn, culminate in the Bolotnaia Square protests. This makes for a rousing narrative but may impose linearity and inevitability on collective action in Russia that does not exist. Nonetheless, the thoughts and actions of many of the activists in the book provide a welcome sense of engagement and efficacy as opposed to the one of hostile disengagement presented by Russia's future technocrats in *No Illusions*.

Another welcome innovation is the return of the state to center stage as a critical actor. Because the political elite structures the political arena, it exerts a decisive influence on the patterns of collective behavior that make up civil society. This is an important, but until now, understudied observation, for many scholars interested in civil society emphasize its relative autonomy from the state, even though in practice, states structure the space within which civil society operates. Further, Greene makes an interesting argument that it is really Russia's weak and isolated state, rather than a strong and overly intrusive one, that creates difficulties for its citizens from an organizational

perspective. This is a different interpretation than the one pursued by many scholars who have focused on the power of the state as an explanation for low levels of mobilization.

At times, however, Greene is focused primarily on protest politics in *Moscow in Movement* rather than collective action more broadly, and perhaps this is because he is looking at grievance-based organization that is “collectively seeking sovereignty vis a vis the state” (54). In the cases covered in this book, Greene looks at a type of state action—intrusion—and how it prompts a type of collective organization as exemplars of “good” civil society. It would be interesting to see if and how this framework would explain the actions of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) or other extreme nationalist movements. Another future avenue of study might include how the Russian state invokes as well as provokes mobilization. In practice, the Putin regime has been encouraging some forms of autonomous action (those that serve “patriotic” state interests), while discouraging others. A future fruitful area of study might borrow a little more heavily from the literature on state-labor relations, and the ways in which states use an array of constraints and inducements to shape citizen patterns and processes of organization. The elites do not necessarily always want to ignore all aspects of civil society; rather, it seems that the state in the Putin era has been much more selective in identifying which aspects of civil society it wants to encourage and which discourage by manipulating policy to achieve its broader goals.

Despite their varying foci, all of the books frame the 2011 and 2012 protests on Bolotnaia Square as a potential turning point. Mickiewicz divides Russia into pre and post Bolotnaia eras, demarcated by differences in what the state was willing to do in order to stay in control and what citizens were willing to do in order to express their opinion. Greene notes that the state had successfully created an “intractable opposition” (218) that the regime is either “unwilling or unable to dislodge,” and represents “a real and lasting shift in Russia’s political landscape” (219). In the conclusion of *Developments in Russian Politics*, Gel’man maintains that preserving the status quo may become increasingly expensive for the regime, and that “the country is probably better prepared for a deliberate and consistent transition to democracy than it was in the early 1990s” (263). However, he goes on to argue that “the political conditions for such a transition are less favourable today than they were immediately after the end of communist rule” (263). Even in the presence of dissatisfaction, the regime is relatively isolated and impervious to pressure from below.

Consequently, these three books all identify much larger problems that will persist long after Vladimir Putin is no longer ruling Russia. The contributors to *Developments in Russian Politics 8* describe the progressive disintegration of most accountability mechanisms to such a degree that citizens are bystanders and the government has assumed an independent political existence. Greene portrays a Russia that is governed by a predatory and corrupt elite which has managed to disengage itself from society at all levels. As a result, society cannot engage the state except in rare circumstances. According to Mickiewicz, a lack of trust, wariness and pervasive context of uncertainty traps the future elite into a state of permanent dissatisfaction with little sense

of how to seek change or sustain a position separate from the state. Even as the state controls many outcomes, the underlying context of pervasive uncertainty among the citizenry promotes either disconnect or involution. The implications of these diagnoses is that the elite will be key actors in any attempt to change the rules of the game, although for now, there is little incentive for them to dismantle a system which has worked in their interest.

Gel'man notes that, given the relative stability and legitimacy of the regime, an exogenous shock may be necessary to change the institutional rules of the game. Since these volumes went to press, Russia has become deeply enmeshed in the Ukraine crisis and has inserted itself into the Syrian crisis, both while undergoing a significant economic contraction as a result of falling oil prices and the cumulative impact of sanctions, all of which have contributed to a significant decline in Russia's GDP. Despite the economic hardships, however, Russians' trust in every key state institution has increased, reaching a three-year high. Apparently, Russian citizens have traded economic prosperity for the recovery of Russia's status as a global player of significance. The brief window of opportunity created by the protests seems to have shut for now. Despite Russia's resurgence as a global power, it is facing significant domestic political and economic problems. Judging from these works, how the coalition of interests that make up the elite responds to this crisis will be critical if we are looking to reopen windows of opportunity from below.

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