

Whither Russia? Autocracy Is Here for Now, but Is It Here to Stay?

Kathryn Stoner

The Politics of Inequality in Russia. By Thomas F. Remington. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 234p. \$90.00 cloth, \$29.99 paper.

The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession. By Richard Sakwa. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 418p. \$102.00 cloth, \$36.99 paper.

Political Consequences of Crony Capitalism inside Russia. By Gulnaz Sharafutdinova. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011. 312p. \$38.00.

State Building in Putin's Russia: Policing and Coercion after Communism. By Brian D. Taylor. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 392p. \$98.00.

Cultures of Power in Post-Communist Russia: An Analysis of Elite Political Discourse. By Michael Urban. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 228p. \$89.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper.

Judging from some of the titles of recent books on Russia—for example, Richard Sakwa's *The Crisis of Russian Democracy*, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova's *Political Consequences of Crony Capitalism inside Russia*, and Tom Remington's *The Politics of Inequality in Russia*—all is not well 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Corruption abounds, and state institutions are weak where they should be strong or strong where they should be weak. Under Vladimir Putin, democracy has deteriorated since the heady early days of the 1990s, and the negative externalities of Russia's rocky economic transition—especially privatization—have made it so that social inequality permeates postcommunist society.

The political and economic outcomes in Russia may be disappointing after 20 years but recent scholarship on the region is not. In this essay I review five new books dealing with various aspects of Russia's transition. The picture that emerges from these diverse studies is one of unexpected outcomes from reformist policies imperfectly implemented; corrupted elites who pursue private gain over the public good; growing incongruity in state-society relations; and the importance of informal versus formal relationships and institutions in Russian political and economic processes. None of this bodes well for Russia's future development as a democracy, but neither

do these findings suggest that Putin's autocracy is necessarily here to stay.

Indeed, all five studies wrestle explicitly or implicitly with what is to become of Russia: Given all of its problems and its promise, will it slip further into autocracy or will it step back onto a democratic path? No one appears willing to give up completely on its prospects for political revival despite Putin's return as president and his increasing propensity toward hardening his autocratic rule. The eight years of his first presidency, and the following four of his protégé, Dmitri Medvedev, have not produced an economic miracle. Although the Russian economy grew on average 8% year to year from 2000 to 2008, this was largely on the back of high world oil prices and the revenue windfalls they produced for Russia, rather than because of deft economic policies. The global economic crisis that hit Russia especially hard in 2008 due to its growing dependence on oil export revenues verified that Putinism did not represent a new developmental model. The wake of the crisis demonstrated that many of the basic governance problems that Russia suffered in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 remain more than two decades later. Indeed, predictably perhaps, some have worsened over time due to neglect—including pervasive state corruption and social inequality. The huge street demonstrations in December 2011 and the spring and summer of 2012 in response to a popular perception of electoral misconduct indicated that Russian society may not be as passive as Mr. Putin would like, and that his regime may

Kathryn Stoner is a Senior Fellow of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University.

be less stable than he presumed. Autocracy may be here for now, but is it here to stay?

A Refresher on the Collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's Political Trajectory

Just over 25 years after Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and quickly began the process of political change within the USSR, consolidated democracy in Russia seems more elusive than ever. Indeed, Gorbachev himself recently expressed disappointment with Russia's progress: "[T]here are no steps forward. On the contrary, they are pulling us back into the past, while the country is urgently in need of modernization. . . . Putin wants to stay in power, but not so that he can finally solve our most pressing problems: education, healthcare, poverty. The people are not being asked, and the parties are puppets of the regime. . . . [N]ew parties are not being allowed, because they get in the way."¹

Despite his clear impatience with the pace of change in contemporary Russia, Gorbachev came to power in 1985 with reform, not revolutionary change, much less the destruction of the Soviet system, as his goal. Things did not go as planned, however. His halting reforms between 1985 and 1991 led to the gradual unraveling of the system and then its sudden, relatively bloodless, end in the attempted coup against him by members of his own Politburo in August of 1991.

Regardless of the powerful offices the coup leaders represented, the entire attempted coup of August 19–21, 1991, had a Keystone Kops element to it. The plotters miscalculated the amount of support and mobilization they would actually receive from Soviet citizenry—especially outside Moscow. They also did not anticipate the determination or importance of Gorbachev's rival, Boris Yeltsin, in the process of change that had already taken place. Inexplicably, they allowed him to slip out of his dacha outside Moscow on August 19. He eventually made his way to the Russian White House, then the seat of the Congress of People's Deputies, of which Yeltsin had served as chairman before being elected president of Russia in June 1991. He managed to convince the Soviet military to side with him and Russia and not to fire on Soviet citizens. The coup attempt unraveled on August 21. Gorbachev, who had been held at his southern dacha, returned to Moscow broken emotionally and politically.

Throughout the fall of 1991, Yeltsin and his government methodically took over Soviet ministries and other political institutions, moving them under Russian control. Gorbachev, still under the illusion that he could save the Union, continued to try to rally republican leaders around the idea of a loose confederation that he would lead. But the writing on the wall was clear by December 1, as Ukrainians voted in a popular referendum to secede from the Union. The signing of an agreement days later

by Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus to create a new Commonwealth of Independent States (the Belovezh Accords) put the final nail in the coffin of the Soviet Union.

Unlike transitions from authoritarian rule in Latin America, there was no pact between Gorbachev or Yeltsin and other members of the old regime that peacefully ended the Soviet Union. There was no deadlock or negotiated outcome that produced democratic breakthrough. The military was not a major player in producing a regime change. There was also remarkably little blood spilled in this first phase of the Russian transition from communism (three people died in central Moscow during the coup attempt). The democratic opposition, led by President Yeltsin, decisively took over the reins of the Russian state through 1991.

Why did the Soviet system unravel so quickly? First, although the sophisticated planning mechanism that was able to modernize a predominantly peasant agricultural economy in the 1920s and 1930s was well suited to huge developmental projects, the communist system proved unreliable and unwieldy by the 1980s. The power of ideology also waned in the declining years of the Soviet system. In addition, the Communist Party itself had become a bloated bureaucracy by the mid-1980s, following Leonid Brezhnev's death in 1982. The fallacy of the constitutional position of the party as "the leading and guiding force of Soviet life and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organs and public organs" was increasingly in question by the time Gorbachev acceded to power as general secretary in 1985. Indeed, his original plan under *perestroika* was to reconstruct the party and the Soviet political system around it.

Successive leaders had tried to make changes to the system before Gorbachev initiated *perestroika*. Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's immediate successor, was the first in a line of Soviet reformers. His bifurcation of the Communist Party, *sovnaarkhoz*, and his limited attempts at political and cultural reform were all undone, however, by Brezhnev when he assumed leadership after Khrushchev's ouster in the early 1960s. Under Brezhnev's long reign, the system stagnated. The large developmental projects that had benefited from the extreme centralization of the party and command economy had been largely completed under Stalin. A backward, agrarian country had been rapidly industrialized (even overindustrialized), adult literacy was raised to 98%, and by the 1960s the Soviet Union was challenging American hegemony not just on earth but in space.

In contrast, by the 1970s and early 1980s, the Soviet system had begun to decline. There was a growing crisis of regime legitimacy within Soviet society. Moshe Lewin quotes British journalist Martin Walker: "The country went through a social revolution as Brezhnev slept."² With rapid rises in education levels came increased undermining of the ideology of high mobilization required by

the system. The Soviet “social contract”—whereby the state provided cradle-to-grave services and guaranteed employment—was gradually failing. The adage among Soviet citizens, “we pretend to work, while you pretend to pay us,” gained currency throughout the 1970s. Increasingly, a chasm opened between the promises that the regime made in its propagandistic claims regarding the superiority of the socialist way of life and the regime’s growing inability to deliver.

Second, as Gorbachev assumed the office of general secretary in March 1985, the Soviet economic system was badly in need of reform. Despite Khrushchev’s boasts in 1961 that the Soviet economy would surpass the gross national product per capita of the United States within 20 years, by 1980 it had attained only about one-third of the US rate.³ In the 1970s, annual growth dipped to less than about 3% on average, and by 1985 had declined further to 1.6%. This steady decline in growth rates was driven by declines in production outputs in previously stellar industries, such as coal and steel. Further, oil production was also sliding by the mid-1980s, and agricultural production was “anemic” by 1982, purportedly dipping below plan levels.⁴

Beyond this, an aging capital stock and low investment rates also proved problematic in boosting Soviet production. Soviet firms were not required to live within their means or to adjust production in response to demand for their products. They faced no hard budget constraints. Bureaucrats in Soviet ministries found inputs for production and markets for finished goods. If a manager needed more money to stay apace of the plan, the central government could print it. Money had little meaning or value in the system anyway. By the time of the Soviet collapse, inflation rates were approaching 100%.⁵

The Soviet Union was also not immune to some of the problems that were affecting the broader world economy—particularly in the 1970s, when world oil prices declined. This economic slowdown, combined with the relentless pressure to fulfill ever-rising production plans, led to further economic inefficiencies. Enterprise managers would pad their reporting of production outputs.⁶ This type of behavior, often with the overt (for a fee) or at least tacit acceptance of bureaucrats who were supposed to oversee and stop this activity, helped to fuel the growth of the black market (or shadow) economy and official corruption, further dragging down economic performance.

Third, social changes as well as negative demographic trends fueled economic problems. Soviet population growth dropped about 50% between 1960 and 1980, causing a decline in the size of the workforce and an increase in pensioners in need of state support. Death rates for both men and women were on the increase by the time Gorbachev came to power in 1985. Overall, standards of living were rapidly declining from the 1970s onward in comparison to Organization for Economic Co-operation

and Development (OECD) countries, especially in areas like housing (in chronic short supply) and education.⁷

The political and economic challenges inherited by Gorbachev’s successors in Russia—including Yeltsin, Russia’s president from 1991–99, his designated heir Putin (2000–2008), Putin’s protégé Medvedev (2008–12), and now Putin again—were thus considerable. One should appreciate the enormity of the task: Never before in history had political, economic, and social transitions occurred simultaneously and in the wake of the collapse of an *empire*. Russia’s postcommunist leaders were faced with the task of rebuilding (or building from scratch, in some cases) state administrative structures capable of supporting fundamentally different forms of economic and social relationships. These reforms were undertaken without a blueprint or map, and so we should not, therefore, be surprised that the task turned out to be “harder than we thought,” to quote Yeltsin in his apologetic resignation as president in December 1999.

The Enduring Challenges of Transition

In reviewing some of the recent scholarship on Russia’s path over the last two decades, I begin with Sakwa’s impressive overview of what ails Russia’s political system in *The Crisis of Russian Democracy*. Unlike the other four books under consideration in this essay, Sakwa’s is a macro examination of Russia’s political institutions and the competition between formal and informal power. The book’s central insight is that Russia has developed a “dual state” that is divided between a formal, constitutional order and the administrative regime—a regime that itself is divided between formal and informal rules (p. 29)—reminiscent, in fact, of the Soviet political system.

Sakwa is a keen observer and longtime analyst of Russian politics. He has an uncanny ability to discern patterns of elite behavior where others may simply see raw struggles for power. At the outset, he acknowledges the contradiction in his argument that when considering Russian politics under Putin, “the potential for democratic renewal within the existing constitutional order has not been exhausted; but at the same time authoritarian consolidation remains possible” (p. 1). Given that Sakwa is writing in real time, and that predicting anything in Russian politics is always dangerous, this may seem like a hedge, and it is.

The author completed his research and writing prior to Putin’s return to Russia’s presidency in March 2012. The Medvedev succession to which the subtitle refers is his assumption of the presidency in 2008, not his stepping aside for Putin’s return in 2012. (Putin and Medvedev actually switched jobs following Putin’s election in 2012, such that Medvedev took over as prime minister—the job Putin held while Medvedev was president—as Putin reassumed the presidency. Russian commentators refer to this

as “castling”). Reviewing Sakwa’s conclusions, then, written as they were midway through Medvedev’s presidency from the perspective of only two years later, reminds us of the fluidity of Russian politics and the danger of drawing conclusions too hastily.

Sakwa is far too sanguine about Medvedev’s modernization and liberalization policies, claiming, for example, that “Russia under Medvedev entered a new stage of development. With the restorative agenda having been secured under Putin, the way was opened for a new wave of modernization, including democratization” (p. 332). The author sees under Medvedev a modernization “agenda” that included a focus on “human development, the rule of law, the struggle against corruption, and above all fighting the excesses of bureaucratic regulation and state intervention” (p. 333).

Sakwa is correct in noting that there did seem to be a difference in the rhetoric and tactics, if not exactly the policies, of Medvedev versus Putin. Medvedev’s condemnation of bureaucratic excess and legal nihilism and his plans to wean the Russian economy from its dependence on oil revenues remained ideas only and did not result in truly significant policy changes, however. His compliance with Putin’s resumption of power (which, by all accounts, came as a surprise to him) demonstrated that Medvedev was Putin’s man to the bitter end—and remains so as his prime minister.

As an experienced student of Russian politics, however, Sakwa is not naive, and he does note that to the extent that Medvedev became popular with the Russian public, his authority and popularity were “on loan from Putin” (p. 343). He then argues that Medvedev scored several independent policy successes, making him popular with the Russian public. In the end, though, and in the two years not covered by Sakwa’s analysis (2010–12), Medvedev proved too weak to stand on his own. Putin’s resumption of power seems to lean toward authoritarian consolidation more than the democratic renewal that Sakwa sees as a possibility throughout the book.

Michael Urban’s *Cultures of Power in Post-Communist Russia* follows Sakwa’s emphasis on elite politics in the postcommunist era. Urban, like Sakwa, notes that in Russia (as in the Soviet Union), formal relationships and statements are seldom what they seem. His project in this book is to discern the actual meaning of elite political discourse—to measure the distance between what political actors say and what they actually mean, and by extension, what this says about trends in Russian political culture. This is no easy task in any social setting, but is particularly challenging in a society in flux with an analyst who is a presumably strong but still non-native speaker of Russian. (Curiously, Urban makes no mention of the potential for mistranslation or misunderstanding due to language, which one would think is a particularly important danger in a book devoted to the analysis of discourse).

As Urban himself admits, this book is unlike most others on contemporary Russian politics, nor does it follow the trends of comparative studies of democratization or authoritarianism. The author’s approach is more anthropological, sociological, and philosophical than it is strictly political. He draws from writers such as Jürgen Habermas (on rationality) and Max Weber (on power and morality), and he employs the thick descriptive and observational techniques of anthropologists like Clifford Geertz. Urban rests his study on two basic assumptions: “one, that *tabulae rasae* do not occur in the sphere of society, and that perception, cognition, assessment and action are fundamentally conditioned by culture; and two, that an investigation of political culture of Russian elites can disclose a critical dimension of their politics, identifying both what actors are able to think, say and do, and that which they cannot” (p. 1). As a result, the book is more concerned with perception than with fact.

Urban interviews 34 political elites who played important roles in politics in the Soviet Union and Russia between 1985 and 2006. The interviews are conducted mostly by Urban himself, but several are done by two native Russian speakers on the author’s behalf. Urban is obviously not attempting to come up with statistically significant findings in such a small, nonrandom sample of respondents, and he freely admits this. His purpose is different. He chooses to interview key political actors who have participated in Russian politics under different leadership regimes, including Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin. He categorizes the respondents according to the period in which they were in power and refers to them anonymously in the body of the book. Yet the interviews are not truly anonymous because respondents were specifically chosen because of their identities and political roles, and, strikingly, although Urban characterizes the interviews as anonymous, there is a list of those included in the study and their biographies in an appendix at the end of the book.

This is a group of pretty eminent people involved in various levels of Russian politics during the last 20 years, including former prime ministers and past and present members of the State Duma and Federation Council, Russia’s upper house of parliament. Some of these political actors, though by no means all, have been interviewed many times by other analysts or have written books about their particular experiences in Russian politics. But Urban’s purpose and research design demand that they each respond to the same set of open-ended, basic questions, covering their career highlights, personal qualities, the role of moral principles in politics, and formulae for success in politics.

Respondents were also asked a set of questions about their role (if any) in several key moments surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1990s in particular (the failed coup attempt against Gorbachev, Yeltsin’s effective dissolution of the Soviet Union through the Belovezh Accords in 1991, and Putin’s rise to power in

the fall of 1999) (pp. 21–22). Urban’s goal is to generate “collective stories” from this set of political actors in order to address specifically the issues that form his methodological framework—social relations, political community, morality, competence, and revolution—and his chapters follow each of these topics.

There are several important contributions in Urban’s highly original study. The biggest contribution is his documentation of Russian elites’ understandings of their relationship to society—that people are not really to be consulted so much as controlled or manipulated. As Urban notes, “the people are assigned no agency” (p. 79). Society must be kept back by all means so that social demands do not overwhelm the private interests of state actors. The state is a resource to drain, not a vehicle by which to provide for the public good.

While this may be an accurate description of Russian state-society relations over the last 20 or so years, Urban points out that it is a difficult platform on which to build a democracy. He also argues that Russia has an authoritarian tendency in no small part because Russian elites lack a concept of “loyal opposition,” and tend to regard all opposition as inherently subversive to the regime and deserving of containment, if not outright repression. In his study of language across five cohorts of respondents, he finds that those in opposition to one another use the language of morality or incompetence to denigrate one another.

Indeed, a truly intriguing aspect of Urban’s study concerns elite perceptions of morality in politics. The author deliberately asks the elites in his study not about their own morality but about the role of morality in political discussion and the “concepts of the good circulating in the political class on which individuals can draw in order to locate themselves in the world of politics, to express their identities and justify their actions, and to characterize the behavior of others” (p. 91). Some of the responses are fascinating justifications for plainly bad behavior. One respondent, in a quote that leads off Chapter 4, notes that morality is relative and extremely local: “You’re a member of a tribe, and among your own, there’s one morality, while for those who do not belong to the clan there is another” (p. 91). This and the chapter that follows suggest that Russian politics is dominated by extreme factionalism rather than the simple duality of bureaucracy and presidential administration that Sakwa observes. Both Urban and Sakwa agree, though, that Russia is governed more by unofficial rules than by formal institutions. Urban’s close study of a particular set of elites since the Soviet collapse makes him far more cautious about where the country is headed politically than is Sakwa.

The issues of networks, factionalism, and formal versus informal sources of political authority and legitimacy that are central to Sakwa’s and Urban’s studies are also of prime importance in the next two books under review—

Sharafutdinova’s *Political Consequences of Crony Capitalism inside Russia* and Brian Taylor’s *State Building in Putin’s Russia*. Beyond this, however, both of these studies also highlight a theme that has recurred in different spheres of Russian politics since 1991—the unintended political outcomes of the political and economic reform processes.

Despite the reference to crony capitalism in the title, Sharafutdinova’s book is actually more of an innovative look at the relationship between elections and democracy—a relationship that is not as intuitive as it might sound at first—rather than just a study of the overlap of politics and business. Moreover, the author seeks to understand some of the peculiar patterns of politics produced by the fusion of business and government interests in Russia over the last 20 years.

More specifically, this book centers on the puzzle of why Russian voters appeared so accepting of Putin’s authoritarian turn in late 2003 and 2004. Sharafutdinova notes, for example, that when Putin abolished gubernatorial elections in September 2004 (if one assumes that elections are necessary but not sufficient requirements of any democracy), there was very little public outcry and, in fact, opinion polls at the time “produced rather shocking results: 44 percent of the respondents supported Putin’s decision; 42 percent disapproved. The majority of Russians seemed to support the curtailing of their right to participate in regional government formation” (p. 5). Given that in other public opinion polls Russians appear to value democratic values, she wonders why they would be so accepting of the curtailment of their electoral rights at the level of government that most affects their daily lives.

Sharafutdinova identifies general disgust with the way in which regional and national elections were conducted, resulting first in voter apathy and then in abstention from voting altogether: “The act of voting and the elections themselves were being progressively devalued as the arsenal of elite tactics to ‘manage’ the electoral results grew” (p. 5). In sum, she argues, “the authoritarian turn associated with Putin and supported in large part by the public should be viewed as a political response to the exigencies imposed by the interaction between crony capitalism [the fusing of politics and business], political competitiveness and the electoral process” (p. 6).

Like Sakwa and Taylor (discussed next), Sharafutdinova illustrates boldly that institutional forms do not always represent actual function, regardless of what their creators intended, and therefore produce unexpected political outcomes in Russia: “At least in the short run, political competition and elections in the case of Russia did not ensure governmental accountability, encourage political participation, and legitimize the political system” (p. 6). On the contrary, elections run against the background of dense elite networks, and “crony capitalism”—where business and government overlap and personal ties, rather than competition, are at the basis of every economic or

political transaction—gave democracy a bad name among Russian citizens, opening the door to easy acceptance of political recentralization and hardening autocracy. Sharafutdinova argues that as long as this autocratic system can maintain legitimacy—that is, the belief of citizens that the system is most appropriate for society—then it is stable and a democratic reversion is unlikely.

Although this author's general argument is intriguing and plausible, methodologically the study is more limited. Sharafutdinova bases her conclusions for Russian politics in general on observations from two already well-researched regions of Russia—Nizhnii Novgorod oblast (where current opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was governor in the early 1990s before being called to Moscow by Yeltsin to serve as a deputy prime minister) and the Tatar Republic. She uses Nizhnii Novgorod as an example of “fragmented cronyism”—where elite clans battle one another for political office and the economic rewards that flow from it, while Tatarstan is an example of what she terms “centralized cronyism”—where a single political leader (in this case, the long-serving president of the republic, Mintimar Shaimiev) is able to develop a clan or elite network that controls both political and economic resources within a single region. This was accomplished not only because of Shaimiev's wily leadership but also because of the relatively unique economic makeup of Tatarstan: It is one of Russia's leading oil producing regions. Tatarstan was also among the most aggressive regions in Russia in the 1990s in terms of seizing political and economic authority from the weak federal state. It led the way in negotiations between the federal government under Yeltsin and other republics of Russia in establishing control over key national resources and licensing. It was innovative in privatization as well, producing its own program that allowed it to maintain a sizable share of regional industrial assets, and controlled the process of demonopolization of industry in the region. Tatar elites, therefore, consolidated control over the regional economy using political levers.

Sharafutdinova uses these contrasting cases of elite fragmentation and elite unity in a cross-regional (Russia is composed of 83 regions) data set on citizen perceptions of corruption. Her interest is not in the causes of corruption in the regions of Russia but “whether people in politically competitive regions [where there is elite fragmentation like her portrayal of Nizhnii Novgorod] are more likely to have greater perceptions of corruption” than in regions where centralized cronyism prevails (what she finds in Tatarstan) (p. 129). Her indicator of political competition is slightly problematic—fewer seats won in regional legislatures by United Russia (Putin's preferred party)—and she does not explain why she has chosen this indicator over number of parties or political organizations in the region, for example.

More problematic, though, is that corruption is notoriously difficult to assess, and perceptions of it are especially unreliable. Thus, although Sharafutdinova does an

admirable job of operationalizing her dependent (corruption) and independent (level of competition) variables, conceptually they are both problematic, and in the end it is difficult to tell what, if anything, she is actually picking up in her regression models. She reports that “perceptions of corruption are higher in regions with higher political competition” (p. 130). But is corruption exactly the same as cronyism? She does not actually explain whether they are functionally the same, or what the nature of corruption might be that respondents report that they are perceiving. Is it in government specifically? Is it among individuals out of government and or in private business? These things remain unclear.

Despite this lack of clarity, Sharafutdinova's is an admirable first book by a promising student of Russian politics. Her study produces some interesting policy recommendations regarding the importance of establishing property rights before introducing electoral mechanisms, and thereby avoiding the possibility of the fusion of politics and economics as in Russia. Although she is doubtful that Russia will exit its pattern of clientelistic politics anytime soon, like Sakwa she does not see its fate as doomed to autocracy: “Political instability and uncertainty therefore remain a ‘congenital’ effect of crony capitalist systems, whether competitive or noncompetitive” (p. 171). One severe and prolonged shock to the Russian economy could shake society out of its stupor, such that social actors would challenge the legitimacy of the system. Indeed, we saw some evidence of this in the wake of the corrupt elections for the Russian State Duma in December 2011, when thousands of protesters took to the streets in Moscow, and again with mass protests on May 6, 2012 following Putin's reinauguration as president. Putin, however, seems certain of the legitimacy of his regime among the Russian population outside of liberal Moscow or St. Petersburg. He has indicted or arrested many protest leaders (including Nemtsov), continued his crackdown on civil society and nongovernmental organizations engaged in politics of any type, and met little public opposition to these moves. For now at least, his autocracy seems stable.

Taylor turns our attention to the inner workings of the Russian state security apparatus in the postcommunist period. Like Sakwa and Urban, and to a slightly lesser extent Sharafutdinova, Taylor argues that Russia's current leadership disregards the common citizen at its own peril.

Taylor's excellent book analyzes an understudied area of the Russian state—policing and the mechanisms of coercion—to get at the broader question of the character of Putinism. His study is a valuable empirical analysis based on a solid theoretical framework that distinguishes the state's capacity (ability to adopt and implement policies) from its quality (the degree to which it serves the public good impartially).

As Taylor notes, when Putin first became president in 2000, he proclaimed strengthening the state and the

“dictatorship of law” as his prime goal. As noted earlier, the post-Soviet Russian central state was ill-suited to the basic tasks demanded by the transition: regulating a fledgling market economy, collecting taxes, and spending funds on public goods. Among its greatest failures was maintaining basic law and order. Crime and corruption had risen dramatically throughout the 1990s. Putin, then, correctly diagnosed one of the key challenges of the transition period. But as Taylor argues, his strategy for rebuilding the state turned out to be flawed. The author concludes that “serious deficiencies remained in both the capacity and especially the quality of the state, and in particular its force-wielding organs, at the time he left the presidency in 2008” (p. 3). Many of the inadequacies of governance under Yeltsin’s administration—such as crime fighting and efforts against terrorism—persisted under Putin. Taylor also finds that security of property rights was as weak through 2008 as in the 1990s due largely to the inconsistency of rule of law.

Separating the issue of state capacity from state quality is a useful way of understanding what has and has not changed in Russia. Undeniably, as Taylor admits, state capacity—that is, what the state can actually do—has improved in some ways relative to the 1990s. For example, the state is better able to collect taxes, and its coercive capacity over society has certainly increased. This coercive capacity is not aimed at crime fighting, however, so much as it is at taming political opposition through selective application of the rule of law. Taylor argues that crime fighting and law enforcement abilities have not improved beyond this point, however, because state quality (as opposed to capacity) remained low in these areas: “[L]aw enforcement officials too often have engaged in corrupt practices, flouted the law, and preyed on rather than worked for the citizenry” (p. 4). He notes (p. 287) that

compared to the Yeltsin period, the levels of violent crime and terrorism were roughly equal, suggesting that there was less to Putin’s project than many analysts, Russian and otherwise, have claimed. The insecure nature of property rights for businesses of all sizes also reflected the inability of law enforcement agencies to fulfill a key routine task as defined by law.

This characterization of the Russian state and political culture resonates with the other books covered so far in this review. The state does not work for society; it works against it.

Another unique contribution of Taylor’s study is his attention to the inner workings of Russian bureaucracy. Analysts still understand little about how policy is implemented (or not) in Russia and how things like organizational culture, resources, and sense of mission interact within postcommunist bureaucracies. Ideology was an important guiding force within the Soviet system of public administration, but appears largely absent in the post-Soviet context. The author looks specifically at the beliefs

of law enforcement officers in Russia and how the constraints under which they operate affect what they do in practice. His study covers the 1990s through 2008, although he does make reference to the first few years of Medvedev’s presidency, noting presciently that “it is a bit of a fiction to pretend that the Putin era ended in 2008 when Dmitriy Medvedev became president” (p. 5).

Taylor uses both quantitative and qualitative indicators—including the admittedly problematic World Bank World Governance Indicators—to examine variations in state capacity in Russia over time. He supplements them with more than a hundred interviews conducted over a nine-year period. Since surveying members of Russia’s coercive apparatus is nearly impossible, his interviews are impressive though inadequate from the point of view of making statistically significant claims. Recognizing this, he provides thick and lively descriptions and inferences from this primary material and provides what is surely the best available (to date) analysis of the inner workings of a crucial part of the Russian state.

This case study of the security and police services in Russia indicates that the Russian state apparatus remains low in quality and uneven in capacity for three reasons: 1) the dominance of patrimonial or informal and personalistic practices within the bureaucracy; 2) a weak and constrained external monitoring ability that would be better provided by autonomous civil society organizations than internally by the state itself; and 3) the “failure to instill a new set of values among power ministry personnel that would lead them to consistently work for more general interests” (p. 288). Until these fundamental issues are resolved, the Russian state appears to be doomed to poor performance, to the detriment of further political and economic development.

If Taylor’s book focuses on the elite-centered “supply side” of politics, Remington’s masterful study of social inequality focuses on the demand side of society relative to the state. Remington turns attention away from elite actors to the fate of Russian society since 1991 and communism’s demise. Recall that the great promise of the Leninist workers’ state was extreme equality. This promise was not realized, of course, but in communist times the bases of social inequality—party membership and then position within the party—were in many ways different from the sources and degrees of income inequality that arose quickly and have persisted in the postcommunist era.

Remington’s book is one of the first systematic and empirically rich studies of Russian income inequality over the last two decades. It provides a succinct historical overview of wages and social welfare in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, as well as a detailed analysis of the sources of income inequality at the regional level in Russia.

Remington begins by describing the problem: Russia’s income inequality has close to doubled since the end of the communism. It rose quickly in the early 1990s, then

declined slightly in the late 1990s and early 2000s following the economic crisis of 1998, only to rise again steadily through 2008. At the time that the global economic crisis hit Russia (autumn 2008), the country's Gini index was 42.3 (rising from 29 in 1992), with the richest quintile of the population making about 47.9% of total income. As Remington observes: "Overall inequality in Russia is comparable to that of the United States and greater than that of most other postcommunist countries" (p. 1). The author notes that there is significant regional variation in income inequality across Russia, and he uses the region as his unit of analysis in exploring the political causes of inequality. While economic endowments like physical and human capital remained relatively constant in Russia over the last two decades, political relations, he argues, changed quickly among policymakers, enterprise directors, and other organized policy actors. The variation in these relationships across regions is reflected in variation in income distribution, social-welfare spending, poverty rates and relief programs, and regional economic performance.

These findings are surprising—even to Remington! He expected that income inequality would be highest in regions with lower levels of political development; that is, regions classified as "more democratic" would have lower income inequality than those that were more patrimonial and autarkic. At the outset, he hypothesized that "with time, more democracy would gradually bring down inequality through the provision of public goods (such as education and public health care) that would equalize conditions for the population, as well as through redistributive mechanisms such as effective pension coverage, unemployment assistance, and poverty relief programs" (pp. xi–xii). Instead, he found that regions with higher democracy scores actually have the highest levels of income inequality. He concludes that this is due to these governments having more cooperative relationships with regional firms, and encouraging the latter to pay higher average wages. Wages then increase in these regions at both the upper and lower echelons, but there is greater variation between the lower and upper ends of the wage distribution curve than in the generally lower wage-earning, lower democracy regions. Less surprisingly, he also finds that more democratic regions tend to have less poverty and social dependency on the regional government than do less democratic regions.

Remington's study is exhaustively researched, is clearly written, and should be of interest to any scholar interested in the general issue of social inequality. The next logical step from his pioneering study is to discover the longer-term effects of social inequality on Russia's population and politics. This book makes clear that income inequality is of profound importance to Russian politics and its future economic development. High and persistent levels of inequality could have serious implications for regime stability and resilience—whether it goes on as a soft autocracy or an emergent democracy where people demand

greater equality. Moreover, Remington's outstanding study gives future scholars a firm foundation on which to build a new branch of the field of postcommunist politics.

Conclusion: Back to the USSR?

The books under consideration here cover different aspects of the attempts to deal with the triple challenges of state rebuilding and political and economic liberalization. The central message that emerges is one of mixed success and a two-steps-forward, one-step-back pattern to Russia's transition from communism since 1991. These books also leave one with the firm impression that Russia's developmental problems today are essentially the same as those of 1991—a state with uncertain abilities to deliver public goods and elite competition aimed at maximizing private gain at the expense of the public good. Politically, though, Russia under Putin has evolved ever further away from the promise of democratization of the 1990s.

Indeed, by Putin's second term as president (2000–2004) significant rollbacks of electoral and associational rights had been instituted, and according to most metrics, Russia could no longer be considered a democracy at all. Despite the liberalizing rhetoric of Putin's presidential successor (and predecessor) and protégé Medvedev (2004–2008), Russia has come to resemble even more closely the autocratic regimes of Central Asia than the consolidated democracies of Eastern Europe that joined the European Union since the collapse of communism. Indeed, Freedom House now classifies Russia in the same "nonfree" category occupied by Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

Although the constitution forged through force in 1993 by Yeltsin has endured with only two changes (made in 2008 changing the length of the term of president from four to six years and the legislature from four to five years), the functioning of the political system under Yeltsin's hand-picked successor, President Putin, has become even more dominated by the executive over the legislature, and by executives of all levels of government over the judiciary. Russia's nascent political party system of the 1990s has been replaced by a set of political organizations loyal primarily to the president of Russia, and largely dependent on him for their existence. During the last few years, with the demise of parties on both the right and left of the country's political spectrum, there has ceased to be a functioning political opposition in Russia. Despite the recent protests of 2011–12, the opposition remains weak and the regime appears willing to arrest those who would challenge it (most recently Alexei Navalny, the popular Russian blogger and protest leader in the summer of 2012). Further circumscribing of democracy has come from the state's gradual takeover of the media. Finally, civil society and nongovernmental organizations have been choked through legislation forcing reregistration. Others have been unceremoniously raided and closed. Any that receive

funding from abroad are now forced to register as “foreign agents.”

Despite these rather dramatic leaps off of the democratic path the country appeared to be on in the early 1990s, Russia undeniably remains freer than it was during the Soviet period. Russian citizens are not tightly controlled by the state in every aspect of their lives as they were under the communist system, but at the same time, they are not free to say what they want about political officials, to assemble freely (as the hefty fines included in the recently adopted law on protests demonstrates), or to read whatever they like in the press. In part, President Putin accomplished this choking of civil society through a resurgence in importance of the security apparatus in governing the country. Particularly notable, too, has been the steady de-emphasis of the impartial application of rule of law, rather than preferential rule *by* law to punish those perceived to be threats or enemies of the regime, while using law to reward supporters.

The erosion of the content, if not the formal institutions, of Russian democracy has been gradual but steady and is only accelerating now that Putin has retaken the reins of presidential power. When asked recently how he thought the reform process he began in 1985 will end for Russia, Mikhail Gorbachev emphasized the long-term nature of political change:

Interviewer: “Will the country become a democracy, will nationalists assume power or will the communists return?”

Gorbachev: “It will be difficult, even painful, but democracy will prevail in Russia. There will be no dictatorship, although relapses into authoritarianism are possible. That’s because we, or so it seems to me, have only come halfway.”⁸

Notes

- 1 “They Were Truly Idiots,” interview with Mikhail Gorbachev in *Der Spiegel*, August 16, 2012. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/spiegel-interview-with-mikhail-gorbachev-they-were-truly-idiots-a-780526.html> (accessed September 1, 2012).
- 2 Lewin 1991, 2.
- 3 Colton 1986, 47.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 8 “They Were Truly Idiots,” interview with Mikhail Gorbachev in *Der Spiegel*, August 16, 2012.

References

- Colton, Timothy J. 1986. *The Dilemma of Reform in the Soviet Union*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lewin, Moshe. 1991. *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.