Book Reviews


Although a number of books revisiting the late Soviet period and the first decade of the post-Communist era have been published in the last two years, Leon Aron’s Russia’s Revolution: Essays, 1989–2006 is by far the most intimate and compelling of these. In Aron’s amply cited and well-researched book, the author considers the customary topics of post-Communist political, economic, and institutional reform, while also offering the reader enthralling excursions into less-traveled locales—for example, the newly restored and reinvigorated Russian literary and culinary landscapes. Throughout, Aron reveals the enormity of change that has occurred in post-Communist Russia and, while recognizing fully the setbacks wrought by an expanding authoritarianism under Putin, urges the reader to look past the pockmarked trajectory of late and witness the unquestionable advances that separate today’s Russia from the recent Soviet past.

Of the twenty-one essays included in the volume, among the best are those depicting the revolutionary, failed reforms of Gorbachev, the closing days of the Soviet Union, and the enormity of the challenge facing Russia’s first elected leader. The chapter on glasnost eloquently demonstrates how truly groundbreaking and far-reaching Gorbachev’s opening policy salvo was. Additional essays covering the Gorbachev era introduce the reader to many of the icons of this brief revolutionary period, while also highlighting the role of certain serendipitous events that may have altered appreciably the course of reform during this era. In Russia’s Revolution Aron also reveals how exceptionally out of touch Gorbachev was with political realities in the waning weeks and months of the Soviet Union. The essays on Boris Yeltsin and his eight-year reign, while calling attention to some of the president’s more harmful personality traits and second-term lapses, also illustrate how singularly bold, determined, and essential he was at this point in Russia’s history.

Moreover, those looking for an in-depth discussion of post-Communist institutional, political, and economic reforms will not be disappointed. Aron devotes more than half of the book to these concerns, documenting along the way both how the post-Soviet transformation diverged from the Western experience and the truly momentous nature of the hoped-for transition to a capitalist democracy. The author also treats the Western reader to an often-unobserved side of the “new Russia” by including essays on Russia’s scintillating literary renaissance, the material and moral yearnings of the growing middle class, and a delectable discourse on Russia’s traditional and nouveau cuisines.

In the last quarter of the volume, Aron laudably explores more unsettling terrain: the authoritarian recentralization of power and control evident since Putin’s reelection drive gained steam in late 2003. Here, individual chapters allow one to make greater sense of the legal assault on Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s Yukos conglomerate, to fathom the deleterious side effects of growing state control on strategic industries and oil transport facilities, and to appreciate the significance of new institutional barriers that have been constructed to inhibit the free flow of competition—in both the economy and the polity. Each of these
essays demonstrate how, despite the liberal gains of the Yeltsin era, Putin has nudged Russia gradually back toward an authoritarian past. This section also leads one to a rather disturbing conclusion, at least for the Putin regime: as a consequence of the successful recentralization drive, the Russian leadership may soon face a crisis of legitimacy—particularly if things go badly—as there are no independent actors or institutions to blame for the mistakes that will surely be made in this stifled, corrupt system.

If the volume has any limitation, it is that certain important issues have been given short shrift—for example, the growth in new social organizations and nongovernmental associations—while others have only been mentioned in passing—such as the collapse of the health care system and the social welfare system, in general.

On the whole, the book is both exceedingly well written and welcome at an important juncture—that is, as Putin prepared the way for his successor. And, although Putin’s second term has troubled Aron, the author reminds us that revolutionary events rarely follow a straight line and that reversals are to be expected along the way. Aron also urges us to recognize the progress Russia has made since 1985, arguing that it is more useful to measure Russia’s advances against its past than against the West’s present. He appears to be guardedly optimistic that Russia will turn once again toward meaningful political and economic reform. One hopes that Aron’s optimism will be warranted.

THOMAS E. ROTNEM
Southern Polytechnic State University
Copyright © 2008 Heldref Publications


How Russia Really Works covers the informal practices in politics, business, media, and the legal sphere in Russia in the 1990s. It contributes to a growing body of research in comparative politics on informal institutions. Alena Ledeneva’s main thesis concerns the “paradoxical role” of informal practices in post-Soviet Russia: They are both supportive and subversive of formal rules and informal norms; “they accommodate change but also represent resistance to change” (3).

Ledeneva’s concept of informal practices, equally grounded in formal rules and informal norms and focusing on players, helps to explain players’ dual role. She defines informal practices as “regular sets of players’ strategies that infringe on, manipulate, or exploit formal rules and that make use of informal norms and personal obligations for pursuing goals outside the personal domain” (22). The actors involved are closed circles of professional elites who share a body of know-how that is largely unavailable to the general population. Rather than assuming that actors invariably follow a set of identifiable unwritten rules, Ledeneva emphasizes that their strategies involve bending both formal rules and informal norms, or following some and breaking others, and thus illuminate their creativity and mastery in navigating between the two domains.

Between 1997 and 2003, the author conducted sixty-two in-depth interviews with fifty respondents representative of economic elites and various people in possession of know-
how. She controlled for regional variation to the best of her ability, with her findings mainly applicable to large cities.

Chapters 2–7 constitute the empirical core of Ledeneva’s book. Chapter 2 examines the informal practices associated with competitive elections in post-Soviet Russia, which spawned a variety of manipulative technologies referred to as “black PR” (chernyi piar). The author examines PR practices in Russia from a comparative perspective and argues that the specifics of PR practices in Russia, such as a greater scale of manipulation, stem from certain defects of formal institutions—weakness of political parties, lack of independent media, and disrespect for the law.

A comparative perspective is also employed in chapter 3 in the analysis of compromising information (kompromat) to attack political opponents and business competitors. The prominence of kompromat in Russia is contrasted with lustration campaigns (the legal process of exposing collaborators with the secret police in previous regimes) in Central and Eastern Europe, revealing the continuity of political power in Russia.

Chapter 4 deals with the phenomenon of krugovaia poruka, a form of circular control and individuals’ mutual dependence on members of a group. Ledeneva traces the origins of krugovaia poruka to the earliest periods of settlement in Slavic lands and examines its remarkable adaptability and perseverance in Russian polity and economy.

Chapters 5–7 discuss informal practices associated with barter, financial scheming, and alternative contract enforcement that serve as important indicators of the workings of the Russian economy. Ledeneva provides detailed analysis of some of the prevalent barter and financial schemes and concludes with the implications of these practices for the post-Soviet economy. Her analysis reveals that “financial schemes enable economic agents to protect their property and business operations from the exigencies of market reforms” (160) and arbitrary and corrupt authorities. At the same time, these practices contribute to the economy’s inadequate responses to reforms and the poor investment climate.

A few problems should be noted. First, while the empirical chapters provide a nuanced analysis of the informal practices and shed light on the workings of the formal institutions, it is not apparent these practices relate to each other. Second, Ledeneva’s approach, while applicable to Yeltsin’s Russia, seems to be less adequate in understanding the changes in informal practices under Putin. The state needs to be brought in as a key player in Ledeneva’s theoretical framework to understand the increasing integration of informal practices into the “power vertical.” Finally, many scholars of the post-Soviet region have noted these regimes’ patrimonial nature and the reliance on patronage or clientelistic networks. Considering the emphasis Ledeneva puts on the Russian government’s dependence on informal rules, particularistic networks, and interpersonal trust, it is surprising that she does not address the literature on clientelism.

Despite these concerns, Ledeneva achieves a rare balance between a remarkably rich ethnography and a truly comparative and interdisciplinary analysis. Dispelling a number of widespread myths about Russia’s uniqueness and nontransparency, How Russia Really Works sheds light on the informal practices mostly hidden from the eye yet central to the understanding of the workings of Russian politics and economy.

Anna U. Lowry
Indiana University
Copyright © 2008 Heldref Publications

In *From Elections to Democracy*, Susan Rose-Ackerman uses interviews and survey data in Hungary and Poland to argue that governmental accountability is central to democratic consolidation and best achieved through citizens’ organized and direct participation in the policymaking process. Her emphasis stems from the perspective that legislative and electoral institutional reforms are necessary but insufficient means to, and indicators of, democratic consolidation. This perspective suggests parties are poor aggregates of policy preferences and inadequate mechanisms through which publics can—and even then only infrequently—exert their policy mandates. Normatively expanding the dimensions of democratic consolidation, Rose-Ackerman suggests that congruency between policies and the will of the people would be better captured by assessing governmental performance and policymaking accountability.

Focusing on policymaking accountability, Rose-Ackerman evaluates several means of achieving this goal. Greater policy accountability could emerge through a devolution of policymaking to lower levels of government, increased oversight by constitutional institutions (i.e., presidents and courts), the involvement of neocorporate bodies, and in the case of Hungary and Poland, the European Union as a supranational check on national-level policymaking processes. In each case, Rose-Ackerman details their shortcomings in the post-Communist setting. For Poland and Hungary, however, involving nongovernmental actors in the policymaking and implementation process would result in more transparent, and thus more accountable, policymaking. Broader public inclusion and participation of both self-governing and interest groups as well as social organizations in the generative process (rather than reactive efforts, a critique leveled at several of the other means) would not only result in more “democratic” policymaking processes but also democratic consolidation.

However, the reader cannot ascertain whether citizen participation is in fact the best means to achieve accountability or whether citizen participation or any other form of accountability is essential for consolidation. To the former point, despite the theoretical expectations for a higher quality of accountability from citizens’ direct participation, Rose-Ackerman’s case studies neither explicitly test nor provide adequate methodological control to demonstrate this. She also relies heavily on the tenuous assumptions that providing public access to policymaking processes would result in increased citizen participation in those processes and, speaking to the latter point, that greater accountability and greater citizen participation are components of greater democratic consolidation. While she demonstrates the capacity of political institutions to incorporate citizens’ participation, the necessity of this in the context of democratic consolidation is absent. Hungary and Poland do not contrast sufficiently—or pose genuine “backsliding” challenges—to see how variations in generating accountability would meaningfully affect transition outcomes (i.e., consolidation). Inasmuch as policymaking procedures align policy outputs with popular will, they can be considered, at least empirically, as more democratic. Yet, this does not automatically imply—simply because of the cases under investigation—that it is critical to democratic consolidation. However, outside the context of consolida-
tion, the book is a useful guide for students of policy analysis, democratization, and central and eastern European politics and provides an excellent yardstick by which to extend our understanding of the quality of democratic policymaking institutions in new democracies.

MATTHEW LOVELESS
The University of Oxford
Copyright © 2008 Heldref Publications
Historical Methods reaches an international audience of historians and other social scientists concerned with historical problems. Features include the following: “Evidence Matters” emphasizes how to find, decipher, and analyze evidence whether or not that evidence is meant to be quantified. “Database Developments” announces major new public databases or large alterations in older ones, discusses innovative ways to organize them, and explains new ways of categorizing information. “Perfecting Data” addresses generic deficiencies in historical data and suggests ways to alleviate them. “Scholarly Incursions” includes bold cross-disciplinary approaches intended to shake up two or more fields of study. Historical Methods has also initiated an annual issue devoted entirely to lengthy reviews of recent books, emphasizing their methodological and theoretical aspects.

Quarterly; ISSN 0161-5440
Regular Annual Subscription Rates:
Individual: $68 online only, $71 print and online
Institutional: $182 online only, $182 print only, $218 print and online
Add $14 for postage outside the U.S.

CALL OR VISIT US ONLINE TO SUBSCRIBE!

Libraries may order through subscription agents.
Public Affairs & History

journals are now available online!

Individuals and institutions have a variety of options to choose from, including yearly subscriptions, single article purchase, online subscriptions only, or an online/print combination. Please visit our Web site at www.heldref.org for more information.

To order, call 866.802.7059.

e-mail heldref@subscriptionoffice.com,
or fax 205.995.1588.
Guidelines for Contributors

SCOPE

Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization is an international and interdisciplinary quarterly journal that covers the historical and current transformations in the Soviet Union and its successor states. The journal welcomes submissions by academics, policymakers, and other specialists on the political, social, and economic changes begun in 1985. The journal also values critiques of specific laws, policies, and programs, as well as comparisons between reforms in the new countries and elsewhere that may serve as constructive examples.

REVIEW PROCESS

E-mail manuscripts to dem@heldref.org. Manuscripts can be sent as attachments in any typical processing program or as RTF files. Although we greatly prefer e-mail submissions, authors also may mail two copies of the manuscript to Managing Editor, Demokratizatsiya, Heldref Publications, 1319 Eighteenth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. All manuscripts should be submitted exclusively to this journal. Each submission will be reviewed by two of our editors, and the first-named author will be notified of acceptance, rejection, or need for revision. Authors will receive complimentary copies of the issue in which their articles appear and permission to reproduce additional copies of the articles. Reprints are available through Heldref Publications.

MANUSCRIPTS

Manuscripts should be double-spaced and include name, mailing address, telephone number, e-mail address, and a brief (one or two sentence) biographical statement. Citations should be endnotes (not footnotes) and should adhere to the guidelines found in The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th edition, University of Chicago Press, 2003. Accuracy of endnotes and tables is the responsibility of the author(s). Note style (chapters 16 and 17): Books, monographs—Robert T. Huber and Donald R. Kelley, eds., Perestroika-era Politics (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1991), 34; Journal articles—Nikolai Zlobin, “Perestroika versus the Command System,” Demokratizatsiya 3, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 42; Newspaper articles—Alexander Yakovlev, “Rossiisskikh fashistov porodil KGB,” Izvestiya, June 17, 1998. All text, tables, and notes should be typed double-spaced. If your manuscript is accepted, you will be asked to send it on disk or by e-mail.

Transliterations: Demokratizatsiya employs the following journalistic transliteration style for the Russian language: я = ya, ю = yu, х = kh, щ = sh, ё = yo.

• When the Russian letter E appears as the first letter in a word, in most cases it will be transliterated as Ye: Yeltsin, Yekaterinburg, Yedinstvo, Yegor.

• Russian proper names that end in ий, should be y, rather than iy or ii: Valery, Yevgeny, Dmitry. Exception: Yuri. Those ending in ий, ей remain as oi, ei, ai.

• Use Russian political divisions by name whenever possible, such as oblast, krai, okrug, uyezd, obkom, etc., instead of region, administrative region, district, etc.

• Acronyms must be spelled out the first time they are used and, with few exceptions such as CPSU, must be written in the original language. Example: Military-Industrial Complex—VPK, Lithuanian Communist Party—LKP, Communist Party of Russia—KPRF

• The first time a person’s name appears in an article, please include first name, even though in Russia it is not customary. First names and the names of publishers should also be used in endnotes.