

Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015. xiv + 208 pp.

For scholars and students of contemporary Russian politics, Vladimir Gel'man is a familiar name. Many of us turn to him when seeking an insightful and clearly explained analysis of political developments in Russia. Gel'man has written extensively in the past on topics as diverse as institutional choice, center-regional relations, the party system, elections, the role of opposition, and Russia's resource curse. Here he brings many of those strands together to provide a relatively short but sophisticated account of Russia's political development since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, explaining why democracy failed to take root.

It is a hugely readable book and avoids getting bogged down in detail (there is an awful lot to cover) whilst leaving you with the confidence that this is the work of someone with a deep knowledge of the Russian political system. Neither does Gel'man over-theorize. Indeed, the shortcomings of theorists are laid bare, none more so than the assumption in the early 1990s that Russia would obligingly fit in to the Third Wave mode and move seamlessly towards democratization. In just over 150 pages this book explains why that was never going to happen.

Gel'man starts with an instructive anecdote. It is the summer of 1990 and the young Vladimir, then an activist in the pro-democracy movement, arrives for a job interview with former academic, critic of the Soviet system and by 1990 the chair of St Petersburg city council, Anatoly Sobchak. Any illusions Gel'man has are shattered when Sobchak reveals that gaining power, rather than democratization, was always the main objective. Gel'man leaves a sadder and wiser man and embarks on the altogether more honorable career of an academic. Sobchak's receptionist that day, a friendly, smiling young man named Dima, takes the other route. The young man was Dmitry Medvedev, still, in a sense, adds Gel'man, a receptionist to this day.

Although distinctly sceptical about the prospects for change in Russia, Gel'man dismisses both pessimistic and optimistic approaches. For the pessimist, Russia's slide to authoritarianism is a

logical outcome given the country's history and culture. The Russian people are not ready for and do not want democracy. The optimist sees Russia as a "C student" still on the road to democracy though slowed down by protracted growing pains. Gel'man rejects what he sees as the deterministic approach of the former and the naïve view of the latter and instead takes a realist approach with a clear focus on the role of actors and of critical junctures in Russia's post-Soviet history in shaping the authoritarian system that has emerged under Putin.

Russia, argues Gel'man is a textbook case of power maximization by elite actors unconstrained by effective institutions, a situation that stems from the preference for economic reform over institutional development in the early 1990s. Russia now suffers from an "institutional trap" in which political elites have deliberately created inefficient but stable state institutions with few, if any, checks and balances on executive power, and which are designed specifically to maximize the ruling elites' advantages and help maintain their monopoly of rents and political benefits, thereby sustaining the regime.

How might this situation change? In the final chapter Gel'man considers four possible alternative paths for the future evolution of the Russian regime. The "iron fist" scenario in which the regime responds to challenges by increasing its repressive capacity is viewed as unlikely. The Kremlin's success so far has rested on the consolidation of a neo-patrimonial system in which the loyalty of both elites and the general public is guaranteed through the distribution of rents. The use of the stick after "a long and successful distribution of carrots" (136–37) would be a difficult task and, if not carried out effectively, might lead to a backlash and the collapse of the regime. Similarly the possibility of a sudden collapse is downplayed, the conditions for such a collapse being conspicuous by their absence. Moreover, warns Gel'man, regime change is rather more likely to lead to a more authoritarian regime than to democratization. The prospect of "creeping democratization" is dismissed as wishful thinking particularly as such a development would require the strengthening and coordination of anti-regime political and social forces, hitherto an insurmountable challenge for

Russian opposition. Which leaves us with the inertia-based, “muddling through” option. Although the most plausible of the four scenarios, its likely outcome is grim. Regime consolidation will do nothing to solve the problems of poor governance, and the costs to the regime in terms of ever increasing payoffs to political and economic rent-seekers as well as rewards to social groups in return for their loyalty will be high.

Despite the gloomy prognosis, Gel'man ends on a high. Over the years I have spoken to many people in the Russian “non-systemic” opposition and often finish meetings by asking whether they take a pessimistic or optimistic view of Russia’s future. Despite the frequently parlous state of the opposition over the years, to a man and woman they have stated their optimism. “This is our country,” they say, “we have to remain optimistic.” Gel'man suggests he has a similar mindset when he concludes the book by asserting that Russia will, one day, become a free country. In terms of the way he conceptualizes the Russian political system in the book’s title as authoritarian Gel'man gets it absolutely right. No scholar would be taken seriously referring to Russia as a democracy, even in its most diminished form, and increasingly it appears that the “competitive” and “electoral” prefixes are becoming redundant, leaving Putin’s Russia as simply authoritarian. Gel'man’s innate optimism is reflected by his prediction that one day, readers will welcome a book entitled *Democratizing Russia*. If that were to be the case I wouldn’t bet against Vladimir Gel'man being the author.

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David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia’s Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016. 221 pp.

This collection of book chapters which treat a range of disparate topics constitutes David Satter’s attempt to sum up the lessons that he learned during the approximately forty years that he worked as a journalist covering both the USSR and post-communist Russia. One of the chapters extends the coverage to the revolutionary events