Comment: From Overlooking to Overestimating Russia’s Authoritarianism?

Stephen Kotkin

Under Vladimir Putin, the Russian state turned out to be pretty adept at authoritarianism, and the voters have appreciated it. That, at any rate, is the broad upshot of these three articles.

Following what has seemed the dominant tendency in the Anglophone political science literature on contemporary Russia, Henry E. Hale and Timothy J. Colton examine not governance but elections. The two scholars confirm “arguments that Putin draws a great deal of vote-winning power from how people view his performance and that the economy is a large part of this.” Readers may have believed this before encountering this article (I did), but Hale and Colton demonstrate the point marshaling evidence. Their data include, among other sets, the important nationwide postelection surveys of Russians voting in presidential elections from 1996 through 2008 that have been generated by the political science profession—a notable accomplishment. Pundits take note: there are Russians besides oligarchs and siloviki, and their views can be scientifically sussed out.

Indeed, Hale and Colton put forth the ostensibly novel second claim that “Putin has rather consistently drawn support from people who favor a moderately pro-western line.” Of course, in Russia “the west” means mostly Europe, while in American political science “the west” signifies, well, America. So the paradox may not be much of a paradox. Putin has occasionally stood up to America, as well as to the United Kingdom, while pursuing strong bilateral ties with Germany, Italy, and France. In a more persuasive version of Putin’s beyond-economics appeal, the two authors write of the voters’ appreciation for “the restoration of Russia’s standing in the world and the restoration of order.” Simply put, Putin has been associated with two achievements: restoring the Russian state’s sovereignty at home and abroad and consolidating a Russian middle class, which even after the global economic crash numbers nearly 35 million people—about 35 million more than was the case under Boris El’tsin in 1998. So, if you help put Russia on the road to recovery, finally stopping the Soviet collapse, even Russians who are not direct beneficiaries will appreciate it.

Hale and Colton authoritatively conclude that “fraud, voter pressure, and high oil prices”—all of whose effects have been undeniable—“are far from the whole story of how Putin remains in power.” Whether this important truth, backed by the paper’s substantial evidence, gains acceptance remains to be seen. (American views on Russia, including in the academy, appear not overly susceptible to evidence, if Johnson’s Russia List is any guide.) Be that as it may, the authors’ additional contention—that Putin has been able to connect “robustly with the Russian electorate in ways that leaders frequently do in democracies”—seems strange. After all, Robert Dahl, one of the great analysts of modern democracy, noted that legiti-

Slavic Review 68, no. 3 (Fall 2009)
mate, participatory systems need not and often do not have high levels of contestation. "Robust" leader-people synchronicity strikes me as uncom-
mon in successful democracies, where politicians assume office with bare
majorities or often just pluralities, amid sometimes underwhelming voter
turnout, and instead characteristic of some successful authoritarian re-
gimes, at least until the latter inevitably wear out their welcome.

Luke March furthers the proposition that politics in authoritar-
ian Russia exist, kind of. He spotlights the political grouping Just Rus-

sia (Spravedliviaia Rossiia, which could also be translated as Social Justice Russia). His article briefly lays out the limitations of Andrew Wilson's gim-
micky yet important study on Russia’s “virtual politics.” But then it gets
cought up in trying to retain the concept (things in Russia are virtual, but
not wholly virtual), rather than fully elucidating the panoply of manipula-
tive practices and their effects. That said, March does show the existence
of what he calls Russian leftist “sentiment” (rather than public opinion)
that is “waiting” to be represented. Within the comprehensive picture pre-
sented by Colton and Hale, this amounts to a niche, but an enduring one.

Kremlin operatives appear to have reached the same conclusion. While
aiming to diminish the vote for the Communist Party, they simultaneously
worked to build up a controllable left leg in the political system, where the
right leg is the dominant party (or party of power), lately known as United
Russia. Suddenly, however, in the 2007 regional elections, writes March,
the regime-promoted helpmate party “threatened” to become “a real op-
position.” Kremlin backers are said to have pulled back, while Just Russia
itself lacked sufficiently charismatic leaders. But Russia’s sort-of opposi-
tion party survived, March concludes, because it represents “center-left
voters too moderate and too-pro-Putin” to line up with the communists,
and too distrustful of the overbearing United Russia to support the estab-
ishment unreservedly. In sum, Russia has a manipulated political system,
yet "opposition is more than a mere façade, however, and indeed fulfills
several important functions: responding to the public, providing elite re-
cruitment and training, and stabilizing the regime” (or not).

To recap: March argues both that political sentiments exist—"long-
term electoral realities"—and that Russia’s (could-be) opposition party
owes its origins, at least, to “increasingly effective Kremlin management
of the party system,” including “astute use of electoral technology.” His
(shall we say) bold notion of the skill wielded by Russian state actors who
"conjure parties to order" finds striking parallel in the article by Graeme
Robertson. The latter sees the Kremlin deftly learning to manage “civil
society and the streets,” in a feat of conjuring up supportive “ersatz social
movements.” We may remember the Komsomol, but membership in it was
essentially mandatory and there was no legal competition. This is not your
grandfather’s authoritarianism.

The catalyst for Russia’s authoritarian efforts to manage society is said
to have been the street protests in former Soviet borderlands, as well as
in Russia itself (over changes in social benefits in 2005). Usefully, how-
ever, Robertson reminds us that “in each of the color revolutions”—that
is, the successful protests to uphold election results in Georgia (2003),
Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) that threw out incumbents—"the ruling elite had split long before the elections and a strong and credible potential set of alternative elites was in place." Bingo! But this is precisely why the wider profession's preoccupation with elections and "civil society," rather than governance and institutions, militated against understanding what did—and especially did not—transpire in the still woefully governed countries of Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. Elite reshufflings, in the name of democracy, do not ipso facto change states. Nonetheless, Robertson recognizes—like many case-hardened Middle East scholars—that "authoritarian regimes that hold elections with at least some opposition are now the most common form of authoritarian regime."

Authoritarianism is not a default position, not the mere absence of democracy. It must be achieved. Such regimes are often brittle and prone to reshufflings; they can also prosper and, within limits, be popular. Above all, they possess governing toolkits, which they can refine or expand, in a process of experimentation and learning. Obvious points, perhaps, and yet Robertson's recognition that "authoritarianism does not just happen but requires extensive coordination among elites over time"—and not just among elites, as the three articles show—is important. It signifies an analysis beyond personalities, in the profession's slow march away from imagining Russia as a democracy. Still, if our analytical point of departure, spoken or unspoken, continues to be U.S. democracy—the incubator for American political science and its methodologies—then we can end up with tortured locutions like "virtual politics," "hybrid regime," "parastatal opposition," "ersatz social movements." Why ersatz if, as Robertson himself writes, the Russian state "has to design a movement that young people would actually want to join"? Must social movements be nonstate or anti-state to be "real"? Today's Russian politics are as virtual as the contemporary American financial system was real.

To an extent, the methods of the political science trade (what can be measured) have diverted attention from or even muddled the substance of post-Soviet states (how they are governed). Even more consequentially, as evidenced by all three of these articles, political scientists continue to exhibit a normative longing for signs in Russia of a metamorphosis into genuine elections, genuine political parties, genuine social movements—in short, into democracy. Let us hope against hope that this wish comes true. But here's a provocation: Does not the quality of governance, the quality of judiciaries and bureaucracies, matter as much as, if not more than, elections? Is not a liberal (rule-of-law) polity, even absent a democratic franchise, a sine qua non for a civil society? Conversely, are not some authoritarian regimes better than others at promoting economic well being, providing public goods, and engaging cooperatively in the international arena, rather than just manipulating things to stay in power? In sum, short of a rare transformation into a democratic liberal order, can an illiberal state get better at delivering services and everyday governing?

Unfairly, perhaps, these questions venture far from the articles at hand. Still, the three articles concur that what until recently was "electoral
democracy” (something less than full democracy) has become “electoral authoritarianism.” More than that, in Robertson's words, Russia is now supposedly “a paradigmatic case of the new authoritarianism and saw considerable innovation in the techniques of authoritarian control.” Needless to say, that assertion is being rigorously tested by the global meltdown that commenced in fall 2008. The same holds for China. But a well-established literature and wide debate already exists on the nature and quality of governance in market-authoritarian China (which mostly does not have elections). Having to a degree overlooked Russia's illiberal state throughout the 1990s, are social scientists now in danger of overestimating it?