By the early 1980s, the opinion seems to have been general in the Politburo that industrial growth had ceased and the real income of the population had begun to decline. As early as 1979, Gorbachev began to hold private seminars with prominent new thinkers, like Abel Aganbegyan and Tatyana Zaslavskaya. In March 1983, he visited Canada and reencountered Alexander Yakovlev. They turned out to have highly compatible views, and Yakovlev told Gorbachev "that without radical economic reform, the country would sink to the status of the third world in fifteen years (p. 185)." This stark observation would seem to highlight the deep significance of the economic situation in triggering "reform," no matter what independent significance one ascribes to "new thinking."

English's account thins out and then ends in the mid- and latter 1980s with "new thinking in power." In his conclusion, he returns to his earlier criticism of those "realists" who refuse any but a secondary role to new thinking. His sensible view is that "... decline played a minor role in the long-term rise of new thinking [but] a major one in catalyzing the change that brought it to power." But had the ideological struggle waged between liberals and hard-liners in the early 1980s come out differently, post-Brezhnev change "could easily have gone in a very different direction; that it did not was thanks to an earlier intellectual transformation whose origins lie largely beyond the reach of materialist, international-level explanations" (p. 230).

The conflict between proponents of the importance of new thinking like English and the more sophisticated realists, like political scientist William Wohlforth, continues. But the differences between them have considerably narrowed. Both see the economic crisis as the all-important catalyst for change. Both admit the important role played by new thinking. But it would seem that English has prevailed to at least this extent: two of his most sophisticated critics have noted the importance of his work in elucidating how new thinking came to pass and the independence of that story from the economic crisis narrative of the 1980s (Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "From Old Thinking to New thinking in Qualitative Research," International Security, vol. 26, no. 4, p. 111). English's achievement is substantial.

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Marcia A. Weigle. Russia's Liberal Project: State-Society Relations in the Transition from Communism. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. xvi, 508 pp. $65.00 (cloth); $25.00 (paper).

These classroom-friendly books, one focused on the state side of relations between state and society in Russia, and the other on social development, share an important conclusion: successful liberal reform in Russia will have to be a top-down exercise. Nichols manages to sound optimistic about this requirement, praising a strong Russian
presidency as a democracy-enabling institution, while Weigle strikes a more pessimistic note based on weak social organization and trust but leaves the door open for Russian elites to "use their power effectively and sparingly" (p. 464). Both authors chronicle Russia's painful transitions of the 1980s and 1990s in readable and insightful fashion.

Thomas Nichols challenges the now standard presentation of "super-presidentialism" vs. democracy in Russia. The country has a presidential rather than a parliamentary system in the first place not because members of society do not trust government, Nichols argues, but because "they do not trust each other" (p. 8). The absence of social trust makes presidentialism preferable because it helps to limit social fragmentation, to lessen uncertainty, and to prevent rapid change. With this view of the roiling social scene still recovering from the ravages of the Soviet years, Nichols looks to the presidency as a stabilizing and generally enlightened force in Russian politics.

In a portrayal of the Russian presidency in an unusually favorable light, the disarray of the Russian parliament becomes an important secondary focus. Nichols praises the executive branch as "relatively coherent and businesslike" when contrasted with the parliament, explaining why society bypasses the legislature when looking for leadership (p. 149). This depiction is in some contrast to Eugene Huskey's detailed portrait of the chaos in the presidential administration (Presidential Power in Russia, 1999), but Nichols favors public perceptions of power rather than more precise accounts of it. For this reason also, the deep level of parliamentary cooperation with executive power portrayed by Thomas Remington (most recently in The Russian Parliament: Institutional Evolution in a Transitional Regime, 2002) is forsaken for the highly public conflict between the two institutions.

Presidential campaigns, for example, are contrasted with the "divisive tactics" employed by Russian parliamentary candidates in 1993 and 1995 (p. 148). This is an odd take on the phenomenon described elsewhere as the muzzling of the media during presidential elections so that the incumbent (or, in the transition from Yeltsin to Putin, the incumbent's choice of successor) is able to dominate the political landscape. The election campaign of 2000, occurring after the publication of The Russian Presidency, also featured savage denunciation of Putin's liberal opponents, another unwelcome characteristic of "unification". In challenging the conventional wisdom regarding Russian presidential dominance, Nichols at times seems to embrace the kind of regime-driven propaganda of unity that has become a louder message during the Putin administration. This interpretive line has the advantage, however, of helping to explain the favorable evaluation so far of the Putin administration by the Russian public. Order — or at least the appearance of order — is a key precondition of providing a stable state.

Whether or not the Russian state will be particularly democratic remains an open question, and Nichols appears generous in his linkage of presidential dominance and democracy based on the haphazard state-building of the Yeltsin era. But the focus here is on public perception and its weight in opinion formation. The ways in which social opinions can influence decision-making provide a frequent reminder of informal linkages between state and society in this study of the Russian presidency, though the channels Nichols highlights are a far cry from democratic accountability.