

Book Review

Allen C. Lynch

How Russia is Not Ruled: Reflections on Russian Political Development

Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2005, 276 pp.

£15.99, ISBN 0 521 54992 2

Making a direct reference to Merle Fainsod's modern classic *How Russia is Ruled* (1953) in the very title of his latest book, Professor Allen Lynch's aspirations are not strikingly modest. Whether *How Russia is Not Ruled* will prove to be as influential (and classical) a text as Fainsod's book has proven to be, I do not know; but Lynch's book is one of the best 'of its kind' presently available, providing ample information about—and reflections on—present-day Russia's political development. He does so by mixing what could be called a 'political science' approach with 'issues of contemporary political history'—all of this with a keen eye for what (the discipline of) economics can contribute to a fuller understanding of Russia and of the ways in which it may develop. Lynch's position is both unorthodox and (pleasantly) old-fashioned in that his historical and functional analysis leads him to conclude that the strength of Russia's central government remains critically important for Russia's political and economic development "and even for Russia's prospects as a distinct civilization".¹ Lynch restates the paradox that in Russia:

"[...] many of those who have been calling most loudly for the establishment (or reestablishment) of a strong state are also those most opposed to capitalism and democracy as it is understood in Western Europe and North America. Moreover, those in Western countries who urged Russians most vehemently to dismantle what remained of the Russian state in the hopes of promoting both capitalism and democracy helped to set in motion a process that by the late 1990s made it virtually impossible to speak of a pro-reform Russian nationalist."²

Lynch is right—assuming that I have a correct understanding of what, in his eyes, would qualify as "pro-reform". Lynch is right also, I think, in stating that Putin, as head of state, appears "to have grasped the implications of this situation".³ One could say even that President Putin knowingly and willingly plays his part—not only in reclaiming Russia's 'proper position' among nations but, also, in 'reordering' the state itself, as well as

¹ Allen C. Lynch, *How Russia is Not Ruled: Reflections on Russian Political Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 12-13.

³ Lynch, *op.cit.* note 1, 13.

in reordering the relationship between state and non-state organizations and between the state and the individual. This ‘more traditional’ Russia is not necessarily a Russia for which, as an outsider, one would very much care, and not necessarily the kind of regime with which one would be tempted to sympathize very much. Perhaps this “neo-patrimonial”—and, more generally speaking, what I would call this *neo-traditional* aspect of present-day Russia—could have been accentuated more than Lynch has actually done by making historical parallels with pre-revolutionary (that is, pre-1917) Russia more explicit.

I have found much to admire in Lynch’s book and the points of critique I could raise are relatively minor, considering both the scope and the depth of the book. For example, I do not fully understand what he means when he writes that the “parliamentary elections in December 1993 [...] in fact proved to be a decisive defeat for Yeltsin’s political supporters”.⁴ Certainly, ‘Russia’s Choice’ had hoped for a better election result but had Yegor Gaidar and Anatoli Chubais’ neoliberalism ever been really popular? I fail to see how the December 1993 state *Duma* elections meant “decisive defeat” for Yeltsin’s political supporters, as Yeltsin’s position cannot be equated with (support for) ‘economic shock therapy’, which had never been governmental policy anyway, according to Lynch. Yeltsin found ‘new’ supporters in 1995 and a new and more ‘personal’ support in the 1996 presidential elections. Whereas Allen Lynch writes that “United Russia and its allies achieved a supermajority of approximately two-thirds of the *Duma* seats in the December 2003 parliamentary elections”,⁵ it is more informative to note that the two-thirds majority only came about (shortly) *after* the December 2003 elections. In the December 2003 elections, United Russia won about half of the *Duma* seats and (only) after United Russia had proven its great strength did no small number of independent or ‘otherwise dependent’ winners of single-member district seats (and a few others) (re)align with what was obviously now the dominant force in the State *Duma*, in order to be able to partake in the substantial spoils of the winner. There was a tremendous bandwagon effect *during* the election campaign but also a clear tendency to side with the winner *after* the actual elections, which is what we have seen happening in other successor-states to the Soviet Union as well, perhaps most clearly (and most notoriously so) in Armenia. After the December 1999 State *Duma* elections, something similar had taken place, when Mintimer Shaimiev, one of All-Russia’s leaders (which had teamed up with Yuri Luzhkov’s Fatherland) announced that ‘his’ parliamentary faction would not become

⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵ Lynch, *op.cit.* note 1, 159.