Timothy J. Colton and Stephen Holmes (eds.),
The State after Communism: Governance in the New Russia
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Timothy J. Colton and Stephen Holmes have edited a volume of some
good and some very good articles, which in general fit well together,
without too much overlap, but with, perhaps, a few interesting subjects
missing—altogether making for quite a good book on “Governance in the
New Russia”; not for absolute beginners in the field of Russian studies, but
definitely so for more advanced students. After Chapter One, “Introduction:
Governance and Postcommunist Politics”, by Timothy Colton, there
is a Chapter on “Building Fiscal Capacity” by Gerald Easter. Apart from,
I think, the author being rather kind to Mikhail Khodorkovsky (Easter
speaks of “Khodorkovsky’s relentless efforts to define clearly the line that
separates public and private, state and society”); Easter’s article on this
very important—but rather unpopular—subject is quite informative. I
have also learned a lot about what is perhaps an even less popular subject
from Yoshiko M. Herrera’s contribution to this volume: Chapter Three,
“The Transformation of State Statistics”, which deals with organizational
changes to the offices and institutions gathering (and distributing) sta-
tistics from the early Soviet period onwards, as well as with Goskomstat’s
changes in methodology. Kathryn Stoner-Weiss deals with “Resistance
to the Central State on the Periphery”. She finds that “noncompliance
through the 1990s was highly correlated with a region’s status as a repub-
lic but that in republics and oblasts alike, noncompliance was driven by
the industrialized structure of a region’s economy, and the presence of
economically powerful enterprises in the region […] [and that] it was also
driven by […] a republic’s status as a net donor to the federal budget.”2 And:
“while non-Russian ethnicity matters somewhat in explaining a republic’s

1 Gerald Easter, “Building Fiscal Capacity”, in Timothy J. Colton and Stephen Holmes (eds.), The
State after Communism: Governance in the New Russia (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Boulder,
2 Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, “Resistance to the Central State on the Periphery”, in ibid., 87-120, at
99.
noncompliance pattern, clearly economic matters mattered more.”

For the Putin period, Stoner-Weiss finds that “[d]espite numerous attempts, Putin has not (yet?) built political institutions that are capable of breaking the stranglehold of regional economic notables on local politics”. She finishes, however, with what I think is a non sequitur. In her final lines, she writes: “if the central state remains stymied in its efforts to extend its authority to govern across territory, then positive changes will continue to come slowly if at all to the lives of average Russians”. While she is quite right in pointing to the exploitative nature of local barons’ rule in many cases, of the self-serving character of the business of politics at the regional level, a central state which indeed has succeeded in extending its authority across territory will not per se be less exploitative, and will not per se be geared towards the betterment of the lives of average Russians. In fact, Stoner-Weiss does not say with so many words that a strong central state will necessarily work out for the better but merely maintains that, without the center reaffirming its grip on the regions, positive changes to the lives of average Russians will at maximum be slow. Being more of a ‘Russian-style optimist’ than a ‘Russian-style pessimist’ myself (while a Russian pessimist may complain that “the situation cannot possibly get any worse”, a Russian optimist will maintain that “oh, yes, it very well can”), I tend to think the remedy of “strengthening the power vertical” may work to affect the lives of average Russians positively, but that such a strengthening of the center also allows for a more forceful downward trend. A strong central state may also work out to affect the lives of average Russians negatively, as central elites may be at least as self-serving as local elites; central elites may be as negligent of ordinary Russians’ wishes and desires as local elites appear to be, and may also be outright exploitative, unhampered, moreover, by ‘peripheral powers’, as a strong central state supposedly—or, perhaps, by definition—finds little or no counterweight in (weak) regional or local authorities. Under President Putin, the central state—i.e., the central executive branch of power—has been strengthened vis-à-vis the regional authorities; but then, has this served or will that serve ordinary Russians? In his concluding essay, “The State of the State in Putin’s Russia”, Stephen Holmes takes up this very point. He writes:

“The Russian state under Putin will no doubt be more of a unified actor than it was under Yeltsin. But we can be forgiven for asking if this new bureaucratic ‘harmony’,

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3 Ibid., 99.
4 Ibid., 113.
5 Ibid., 115.