
Neither a liberal democracy nor a harsh dictatorship, Russia has fallen into a new unwieldy category of political regimes known as “hybrids,” “illiberal democracies,” or “electoral democracies.” The defining feature of this newly prominent sort of system is the continued convening of elections despite the consolidation of power in the hands of a few and the imposition of restrictions on political and civil rights. The fall of several hybrid regimes – most notably Ukraine, Georgia, and Serbia – to a combination of elite splits and street politics has heightened the interest in protest as a potential force for change at least and for democratization at best. In *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes*, Graeme Robertson has masterfully dissected the mix of elite competition and protest that characterize contemporary Russian politics and has created a complex but powerful theoretical framework for understanding how hybrid regimes in particular manage protest.

Robertson begins by taking hybrid regimes seriously, positing that they should be viewed *“neither [as] the result of unsuccessful authoritarians who fail to impose a closed regime… nor [as] a trick adopted in order to create uncertainty in the eyes of people trying to evaluate the regime”* (p. 12). Instead, rulers of hybrid regimes strive for real legitimacy based on electoral roots; at the same time, they seek lasting stability that genuinely competitive elections cannot provide. Such rulers must work hard to try to “defeat-proof” elections by skewing the political playing field to favor incumbents, including their self-interested allies. It is the very nature of hybrid regimes that, as Robertson succinctly observes: *“Some legitimate and public political competition coexists with an organizational and institutional playing field that renders this competition unfair”* (p. 6). Yet by eschewing harsh repression, the public space remains somewhat open to dissenters. Robertson makes the case that protest in Russia has been more frequent than commonly realized, but has tended to be localized and ephemeral. He locates the real dynamic driving organized demonstrations higher up: Robertson finds national leaders intensively managing their relations with second tier elites, who in turn can exert pressure upwards by choosing to mobilize people to protest.

Robertson’s ambitious and carefully researched work tackles many puzzling aspects of protest in post-Soviet Russia including a plethora of strikes, but the absence of a national labor movement, sporadic economically based protests in the face of constant wage arrears, and the survival of “old” trade unions when independents have been legalized. He also draws attention to the recent appearance of ersatz social movements like the pro-Putin “Nashi” organization. Robertson seeks the explanation for changing and geographically diverse patterns of protest in Russia in the “organizational ecology” of hybrid regimes, by which he means the existing set of organizations and their environment for action; in the state’s mobilizational strategies; and in the shape of political competition among elites. He carefully examines these three variables in their range of possible combinations to explain the variations found both locally across Russia and temporally from the late Yeltsin years through the end of Putin’s presidency.

Using a new data set drawn from daily classified reports from local police to the Ministry of Internal Affairs for the period 1997-2000, Robertson is able to code protest actions – strikes, hunger strikes, blockades of transport etc. – to create a nuanced picture of disruptive actions across Russia. Geographic variation ends up providing insight into the nature of relations between local elites, namely powerful governors, and federal authorities.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2012

DOI 10.1163/187633212X624014
Robertson convincingly depicts governors as manipulating protest to make a case for greater federal subsidies or subduing protest to show their own competence and their region’s allegiance to a newly popular central government. He shows how cooperation with local elites allowed the heirs of Soviet trade unions to beat out new independent groups. Importantly, Robertson illuminates the constant back and forth between street politics and elite politics. By tracking the frequency and force of labor disputes, he demonstrates how managed protest can fit into the delicate balancing act of hybrid regime rulers who seek to promote stability with minimal repression but maximum predictability.

A major advantage of Robertson’s work is his deft blend of knowledge about institutional politics and insights from social movement literature. For instance, Robertson captures a fascinating political dynamic created by Russia’s former mixed electoral system in which the national Duma was elected through a combination of a national party list and single mandate districts. He explains how at a time of political uncertainty in 1999, governors concentrated their efforts on getting their allies into locally chosen seats while largely conceding the party list race to the Moscow clans. Rather than mobilizing citizens to try to influence central leaders, governors preferred to ally with the clear winner – Putin and his United Russia Party – and to focus on preserving their local primacy, a task that involved taming protests. Thus, through attention both to the institutional framework of politics and to intra-elite relations – namely band-wagoning, Robertson is able to explain the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of a decline in protests at election time. Indeed, though his topic is popular protest, Robertson sometimes seems to cast more light on the relations of various levels of officialdom.

In his final substantive chapter, Robertson examines the most recent notable protest events and patterns in Russia: the pensioners’ revolt against monetization of benefits, the heavily repressed dissenters’ marches, and the much touted pro-Putin demonstrations. Here Robertson moves away from the somewhat dry work of creating charts and running regressions to put a human face on the protests. In this chapter, the reader gets more of a sense of what motivates present-day protesters as well as how the regime is trying to fine tune its response to unmediated expressions of discontent. Robertson effectively outlines the policy choices made by Putin to both discourage and “channel” street politics to serve his own ends. Robertson finds the opposition showing more creativity and cohesion, but facing severe obstacles to using the public sphere. He outlines the dampening effect of new labor legislation and NGO regulations on independent organizations. Yet, he points to the tenuousness of bonds among political elites as a sign of greater regime vulnerability than is visible on the surface. Robertson does not offer a prediction as to the likelihood of a Russian “colored revolution”; but he does explain what warning signs to look for within the regime.

Robertson admirably integrates some of the most important insights of social movement theory into his analysis of Russia. As noted above, he carefully weighs the conventional conclusions of a theory based largely on protest-heavy liberal democracies against the institutional features of hybrids. In terms of predicting the potential generation of sustained, national protest movements, however, Robertson could have taken one more lesson from social movement theory to heart: resources matter. Could the lack of organizational networks (versus networks of personal connections) necessary to create social movements be linked to resource distribution patterns and mistrust stemming from the Soviet period? Here, one can consider Marc Morje Howard’s Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist