Having governed Russia for more than a decade, the goals, program, and policy consequences of the Putin team have been identifiable and subject to considerable analysis by observers, foreign and Russian. Sean Roberts’ study, however, fills an important void in our knowledge of the institutional arrangements that are core to the Putin regime as Roberts illuminates in rich detail the structure, functioning, and role of United Russia, the Putin platform party, in contemporary Russia. Drawing upon 80 interviews and an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, Roberts sets out a thorough and highly useful analysis that will significantly enrich the interested observer’s ability to understand this influential political institution. With the study spanning the entire first decade of United Russia, from its December 2001 emergence through 2010, the mid-point of the Dmitry Medvedev presidency (and second Vladimir Putin prime ministership), the reader is provided a rich overview of United Russia’s nuanced but significant role in contemporary Russian political life. Roberts’ analysis concluded at arguably the height of United Russia’s power, so there are more recent developments that may raise questions about United Russia’s long-term centrality to Russian politics. But the discussion is convincing and valuable as one considers where Russian politics are moving in the second Putin presidency of the 2010s.

United Russia is not a political party in the sense that Westerners think of parties or in the more traditional manner that theorists of parties use the term. While United Russia became a mass party of sorts, exceeding two million members in its first decade, and thus only second in size to the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), it is best thought of as a personalistic party with strong bureaucratic elements. The very title of this book, “Putin’s United Russia Party,” conveys the centrality of the key politician under whom the party arose and for whom the party functions. Roberts does not need to devote much attention to Putin himself as he illuminates United Russia, Putin’s centrality to his platform party evident throughout the volume. Roberts does, however, devote considerable attention to those strong bureaucratic elements, and in this his analysis is detailed and useful. An interesting question that must be raised when considering the long-term trajectory of United Russia involves its significance and viability after Putin leaves power. Roberts never discusses this issue, and – indeed – at the time of the book’s completion, Putin’s departure seemed quite far removed from Russian political reality. But, in fact, United Russia is a platform party of Russia’s paramount leader, and the
mounting criticisms of United Russia (e.g., activist Aleksei Navalny’s famous characterization of it as “the party of swindlers and thieves” being among the most well-known throughout Russia) have left even supporters defensive. Putin’s own political needs have evolved as he moved back into the presidency, and it is significant he has given mounting attention to the more recently created (mid-2011) All-Russia People’s Front, of which he is the elected leader, as he has spoken for the need for “new ideas, new suggestions, and new faces.” One senses, then, that United Russia may eventually experience the fate of its presidential platform party predecessors, including Russia’s Choice, Our Home Is Russia, and Unity, all of whom folded when their primary leader’s power needs necessitated (and all of whom are given appropriate attention in Roberts’ study). But for the 2000s and the 2010s, United Russia has an important role to play in Russian politics, and Roberts effectively demonstrates this.

While this tome is chock full of institutional, policy, and elite details, it is well-written and the contents are accessible while the narrative is engaging; hats off to both the author and the editors. Roberts nicely sets his study of United Russia in a broader, cross-national, comparative context, and his theoretical juxtaposing of this Russian institutional experience with those of such varied polities as Malaysia, Mexico, and Taiwan is to be appreciated. Roberts’ intention is to illuminate the “logic” and realities of United Russia while contributing to our more general understanding of political parties that operate in what might be termed “electoral authoritarian” or “hybrid democratic” settings. Roberts overviews the varied perspectives held about the nature of the Russian political system, he treats Russia as being in a “grey zone” with a mix of democratic and authoritarian features. However, as his in-depth case study of United Russia proceeds, the party’s role in complicating the putative democratic structure of the Russian polity is made very clear. United Russia is a “party of power,” it is shown to be a “dominant-power party;” its primary intention is to support the powerful federal executive branch. Even then President-elect Dmitry Medvedev called United Russia a “ruling party” (15 April 2008). Paramount leader Vladimir Putin, the federal executive, and the governing elite are all motivated in their quest for system stability, especially coming out of the turbulent Yeltsin 1990’s, and United Russia is shown to be a central institutional vessel to this end.

Roberts structures his book and findings around three basic roles of United Russia: first, in its managing of elections; second, in helping provide governance (or what he notes as organizing societal interests); and third, in integrating the country, by which he means tying elites with the citizenry, which includes tying the central government with Russia’s vast periphery. In exploring each of these roles, Roberts’ treatment is both comprehensive and