Ellen Mickiewicz

Ellen Mickiewicz’s *No Illusions* makes an important contribution to our knowledge of contemporary Russia at a crucial moment in time. The current crisis in Ukraine has highlighted the drastic shift in Russia’s relations with the West at a time when many in the West had lost interest in post-Soviet Russia. In the United States, this disinterest led to low enrollments in Russian language courses, cuts in funding for Russia-related research, and a general disregard for Putin’s domestic politics as anything more than fuel for comical Internet memes. Against this background of dwindling Russia expertise, policymakers desperately need up-to-date information on Putin’s Russia. Mickiewicz, a leading scholar of Russian media, politics, and culture, fills this gap in contemporary knowledge about Russia and gets us one step ahead of the curve by focusing not only on Russia’s current leadership, but also on Russia’s future leaders. The foundation for Mickiewicz’s book is a set of focus group interviews conducted in March and April 2011 with 108 students at three of Moscow’s top universities: Moscow State University, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, and the National Research University Higher School of Economics. The background and timing for these focus groups could not have been better. While the students had witnessed some key mass demonstrations in 2010 and early 2011, these interviews happened before the massive December 2011 election protests and all of the events thereafter. *No Illusions* provides rare insight into the formation of the worldview of Russia’s elite youth before a key turning point in Russia’s relations with the West.

In the introductory chapter, Mickiewicz is careful to explain her methodology and why she has chosen these students and these three universities in particular. While she integrates some nationally representative public opinion data into her analysis, she makes it clear that the goal of her focus groups is different. She picks this group of students because she is interested in Russia’s future leaders – not the population as a whole. By choosing this group, Mickiewicz gives us a window into the viewpoints of Moscow’s young elite before they take high profile jobs in business and policy. She also carefully qualifies her case selection, noting that Moscow “can be an inward-looking centralized capital for which the rest of the country is almost invisible” (p. 53). This is cited as a downfall of the Russian opposition for their failure to extend beyond Moscow to Russia’s regions, and it is potentially a key feature that will remain with the next crop of Russia’s leaders. Many of the students in the focus groups know little outside Moscow and would never dream of leaving it. With
her research goals and methodology clearly delineated, Mickiewicz continues with her analysis of these focus groups and the current situation in Russia (and Moscow in particular).

The first chapter focuses on Russians’ changing attitudes toward the United States, both nationally and within her focus group samples. Mickiewicz uses national data to show that the affection for America during the Soviet Union has subsided; Russians now more critically and negatively view the United States. The focus group participants echo this national trend. When asked to rank their interest in important countries in the world, America still dominated their minds. Their view of the United States, however, is overwhelmingly negative. Similar to Vladimir Putin, these students primarily depict American foreign policy as “bombing third-world regimes and fomenting revolution” (p. 24). Although many of the respondents have negative views of the United States, they nevertheless see the US-Russia relationship as the most important and expect Americans to do the same. As Mickiewicz notes, “That intense searchlight fixed on America mistakenly expects equal light in return” (p. 30).

The impact of the Internet is at the core of Mickiewicz’s evaluation of this new generation and comes out clearly in the second, third, and fourth chapters. In the second chapter, Mickiewicz notes that the Internet gives future leaders a strong sense of self worth; they see through politicians’ attempts to manipulate the public and do not blindly trust in titles or positions. An example of this is then-President Dmitry Medvedev’s attempts to be “closer to the people” through his LiveJournal (Zhivoi Zhurnal or simply “ZhZh”) blog posts. The students recognize this as “PR” and further elaborate that the current leadership does not understand their generation. After all, Russia’s future leaders “are better educated than their predecessors, far more worldly, and dedicated to the application of their own learning” (p. 61). Despite being better educated and worldly, however, Mickiewicz uncovers an uncomfortable truth about their formation of trust in chapter three. Offline trust, Mickiewicz notes, is built on reputation and performance; however, it is also affected by outward appearance. One of the most surprising findings from the focus groups is that these elite students put their trust in “Slavic-looking” people (white, European) and actively distrust non-Slavic ethnic groups. Ethnicity is key to their formation of trust with others, which has serious implications for future Russian domestic and foreign policy. Their general level of distrust, coupled with the advent of the Internet, has also made these students more skeptical of information (particularly traditional televised or print media), which causes them to seek out multiple sources of information to compare them. This is a key