Vladimir Gel’man


Vladimir Gel’man is a well-known and respected scholar of Russian politics. During the past two decades, he has produced a number of important and highly interesting articles and books on post-Soviet Russia’s political developments. This new book of his is no exception. It elegantly connects arguments from his previous research, while still adding fresh insights, new empirical evidence and bold predictions for the future. Authoritarian Russia is a well-documented, theoretically rich analysis of Russia’s road to consolidated authoritarianism. While it does not offer new, crisp theoretical ideas, it does exactly what a good case-study should do; it speaks to the comparative literature to which the case analyzed belongs, applying and evaluating existing concepts and theories. This makes Authoritarian Russia stand out as one of the best and most readable up-to-date introductions to the history of post-Soviet Russia’s regime developments available on the market today. However, the book has its flaws – most of them concern the theoretical framework applied. I will return to these below.

The theoretical point of departure for Gelman’s analysis is an actor-centered, historical institutionalist approach neatly embedded in the rapidly developing literature on authoritarian politics. His main assumption is that politics in a (non-democratic) country like Russia is, primarily, an elite-affair, in which all actors seek to gain, wield and retain power. If political elites are not constrained, they will naturally try to monopolize power. Autocratization, or “authoritarian drift” as the author puts it, therefore happens as a result of a lack of constraints on key political actors. Next, Gel’man introduces four key constraining factors: domestic elite conflict, international pressure for democracy, pressure from society at large, and ideological commitments of dominant actors. Only the first one, he argues, has been present in Russia, systematically restraining the speed of the authoritarian drift, albeit only during the 1990s. The last theoretical building brick is taken from historical institutionalism in the form of critical junctures and subsequent inertia. Basically, Gel’man argues that Russian regime developments should be analyzed through a series of crucial events. Each event could potentially have led the country down a different path than the one chosen, and the process and outcome of each event subsequently affected the resources and strategies available to political actors at the next juncture.

Gel’man structures his empirical analysis chronologically into four parts: “The Roaring 1990s,” “The (In)famous 2000s,” “The Unpredictable 2010s,” and,
finally, a bold attempt to systematically analyze various scenarios for future developments in “The Agenda for Tomorrow.” Each chapter is rich on empirical details and, with only a few exceptions, very well-documented through an abundance of different sources ranging from the author’s first-hand experiences to popular surveys, newspaper articles and works of academics. The analysis of each period is carefully balanced and offers numerous illuminating perspectives on how to interpret the past, present, and future developments of Russia. Russian developments are compared to developments in other authoritarian countries in other parts of the world and a wealth of theories and empirical findings from comparative politics in general and from the burgeoning literature on authoritarian politics in particular is described to shed analytical light on developments on the ground in Russia. The final chapter is somewhat different in the sense that Gel’man boldly tries to prepare his reader for what he sees as the most likely developments for the future. This is, as the author himself acknowledges, a risky endeavor. But Gel’man really shows analytical rigor here; carefully, and systematically, he analyzes four possible future scenarios, and although he does not exclude democratization in a more distant future, he does make a convincing case for a continuance, and possible hardening, of authoritarianism in Russia. Though the book ends with a short section entitled “Russia will be free,” this seems, at least for a number of years to come, more like wishful thinking (which Gel’man also admits). Tellingly, in the very last words of the book, placed in an endnote, the brutal killing of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov is used to illustrate the lengths to which the ruling elites in Russia are willing to go to preserve power and thus also to caution against the tremendous costs that regime change will likely demand. This is not an optimistic reading of Russia’s not too distant future – but it is a sober and well-grounded one.

As noted, Authoritarian Russia should be praised for the fact that it speaks so directly to relevant literatures in comparative politics. However, in his attempt to provide careful and balanced readings of each critical juncture along Russia’s twenty five years of independence, Gel’man ends up applying a wealth of theoretical perspectives to adequately explain developments, each of which does not necessarily complement each other or the theoretical framework laid out in the first two chapters. Moreover, as Gel’man subscribes to an actor-centered framework, he initially puts some efforts into dismissing structural explanations for democracy such as modernization theory and theories of inequality and ethnic composition for Russia’s regime developments. Why Gel’man only chose these three seems somewhat eclectic. Resource dependency and its well-known negative effects on prospects for democratization are for example not included, which obviously makes it less difficult for Gel’man to conclude that structural conditions for democratization are not bad for Russia. As the analysis unfolds, the theoretical scaffolding further erodes. It soon becomes clear to