

REVIEWS

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Putin's Russia in Russian Eyes

Review of Lyudmila Ilicheva and Vladimir Komarovskiy, eds., *Russia in the 21st Century: Policy. Economy. Culture* (in Russian: *Rossija w XX wieku: Politika. Ekonomika. Kultura*, Moskwa: Aspekt Press 2016);

Review of Elena Shestopal, ed., *New Trends in Russian Political Mentality: Putin 3.0*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015;

Review of Natalia Tsvetkova, ed., *Russia and the World: Understanding International Relations*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017.

Three recently published books on contemporary Russia provide a valuable insight in Russian politics and in the state of Russian political sciences. Two were published in English by an American publisher (Lexington Books) and one in Russian by the prestigious Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration attached to the office of the President of the Russian Federation.

The editors belong to the top elite of the Russian science elite. Ludmila Ilicheva and Vladimir Komarovskiy are professors at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. Elena Shestopal is head of the chair of political sociology and psychology at Moscow State University and former vice-president of the International Political Science Association. Natalia Tsvetkova is professor of history at the Saint Petersburg State University. Among the contributors are several members of the Russian Academy of Sciences, including its vice-president and well known sociologist Gennady Osipov. They belong to the Russian intellectual elite and in their publicly expressed views are supportive to the present regime. Because of this, their views on the character of the Russian state and its policies are of great interest.

The volume edited by Ludmila Ilicheva and Vladimir Komarovskiy provides the widest panorama of various aspects of the current Russian state and society.

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The book is divided in five parts which deal respectively with (1) state, social and political structure of Russia, (2) Russia in the system of international relations, (3) Russian economy in the 21st century, (4) Russian culture in the 21st century, and (5) agenda and strategy of the modern Russia. Problems of Russian foreign policy are discussed in the volume edited by Natalia Tsvetkova; the volume contains papers written by scholars from St Petersburg University. A large part of the book is devoted to the review of major theories of international relations with special emphasis on the realist school, which seems to have the strongest impact on Russian approach to international relations. The most innovative of the three books is the volume edited by Elena Schestopal and co-authored by her collaborators from Moscow State University. It contains results of empirical studies conducted from 1993 with the use of up-to-date methods of sociological and psychological analysis.

The richness of these volumes makes it impossible to discuss all their findings. I should like, therefore, to concentrate on those aspects which are particularly important for understanding the present Russian regime and its dilemmas: both internal and related to foreign policy of Russia.

The crisis of the Russian state and ways of its overcoming is one of the central issues of the volume edited by Ilicheva and Komarovskiy. They give an interesting review of the history of Russia, stressing the colonial and imperial nature of the tsarist state. Seen from this perspective, the seventy years of the Soviet Union constitute a failed attempt to preserve the empire. Its collapse, due to the decisions made by the political elite rather than to the pressure from below, opened the period of prolonged crisis of the state. Vladimir Putin's access to power is presented as the turning point in the short history of the Russian Federation. The authors do not deny the authoritarian character of the contemporary Russian political system but seem to believe that this is the inevitable price for the preservation and strengthening of the state. The emphasis is on the perspective of modernization, seen as a long process. Modernization is not only a political, but also an economic necessity. The authors are very frank about the need to reform Russian economy and to free it from dependency on the exportation of raw materials. In the view of the authors, modernization, rather than democratization, seem to be the main task of the state power. The authors discuss briefly the state of civil society in Russia, but this fragment does not reveal the magnitude of problems faced by independent associations as well as the human rights problems in the contemporary Russia.

An interesting part of the book is devoted to the nationality question. The authors distinguish between two terms, difficult to translate in English (or Polish, as well): "Russian" and "Russkij". The first refers to the national identification with the Russian state and refers to all citizens of the Federation

regardless of their ethnicity. The second can be translated as “ethnically Russian”. According to self-identification about eighty percent of the citizens of the Russian Federation consider themselves ethnic Russians, the rest being composed of dozens of various ethnic groups. The non-ethnic definition of the Russian state is important for the modern concept of state patriotism. The way in which the authors approach this issue testifies to the important change that has been taking place in the contemporary Russia in this respect.

Breaking away from the imperial past and from the ideological character of the Soviet state Russia faces the problem of the definition of her place in world politics. This issue constitutes the central theme of the volume edited by Natalia Tsvetkova. The book gives an interesting review of theories of international relations and of the history of world politics after the end of the cold war. The authors interpret the foreign policy of the Russian Federation as guided by the considerations of national interest. In this, foreign policy of contemporary Russia differs from the ideological policy of the Soviet Union. Russia no longer aims at the transformation of the world after her pattern but seeks a strong position as a regional, Euro-Asian power. The authors express their belief that such policy could be realized in a co-operation with other world powers, particularly the United States. They do not ignore difficulties facing such co-operation but express their hopes in the possibility of achieving mutually acceptable compromises.

The issue which the authors underestimate is the geographical scope of the Russian sphere of interest. From the beginning, Russia sought to preserve close ties with the formerly Soviet republics, the majority of which entered the Commonwealth of Independent States. With the passing of time conflicts emerged between Russia and some of the former Soviet republics, particularly with Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). The authors do not discuss these conflicts and their repercussions for relations between the Russian Federation and the West. While their emphasis on national interest constitutes a valuable revision of the traditional Soviet-style interpretation of international relations, a deeper analysis of Russia's concept of her role as a regional power would be welcome.

For political sociologists the most interesting is the volume edited by Elena Shestopal. The panorama of Russian political mentality based on the twenty-five years of empirical research offers unique possibility to understand the socio-psychological dimension of Russian policies – both domestic and foreign. The fundamental trait of Russian political culture, the strong attachment to the state and the belief in the role of powerful leaders, is fully confirmed by empirical studies. One of the most interesting findings of the book is the increase of support for Vladimir Putin after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of

the crisis in relations with Ukraine. Shestopal's research confirms the existence of the specific trait of Russian political culture: the priority of foreign policy over domestic issues. Historical experiences explain the fact that Russians tend to give preference to the considerations of foreign policy over the domestic ones. This should help to understand why support for Vladimir Putin grew in the years of sharp conflict with the West.

Taken together these three books offer a very valuable insight in the way in which Russian scholars see the present policies of their state. They do not represent views of the democratic opposition but neither are they uncritical in the way in which they discuss the problems facing Russia today. As such they testify to the positive change that has taken place in Russian political sciences since the end of the Soviet regime.