

PAPER DETAILS

TITLE: Authoritarian Russia Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes, by Vladimir Gel'man

AUTHORS: Adnan SEYAZ

PAGES: 182-183

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/344275>

BOOK REVIEW

Authoritarian Russia. Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes, by Vladimir Gel'man, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015, XVI + 208 pp., notes, index, ISBN 10:0-8229-6368-X

Adnan SEYAZ

Ph.D. Candidate, Institute of Social Sciences, Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey;

Research Assistant, Department of International Relations, Kirklareli University,

adnan.seyaz@klu.edu.tr

Vladimir Gel'man, who is a professor of political science at the European University at St. Petersburg and Finland Distinguished Professor at the Aleksanteri Institute of the University of Helsinki, is the author and editor of more than twenty books in Russian and English. Gel'man is notably productive about two and a half decade of Russian politics since the fall of the Soviet Union. He pulls the attention of the readers to the authoritarian politics in Russia in his recent book. With a wide perspective that includes Post-Soviet countries, he focuses on the factors impeding democratization in Russia.

As usual characteristic of Gel'man's work, this study includes a detailed knowledge of Russian political actors and institutions. The structure of the book provides an easy-reading framework to readers. First two chapters on the regime change in Russia and the reasons of failure in democratization present necessary theoretical knowledge within a chronological perspective of Russian politics. Following chapters continue analyzing Russia's last two and a half decades without leaving the chronologic order. Thus, Gel'man's book emerges as one of the best studies that shed light on Russia's domestic politics and the logic of authoritarian rule since 1990.

Since previous research puts forward the reality that some countries democratize while others pursue authoritarian practices, the author centers his argument upon the adoption of a zero-sum game by Russian political actors as a solution to political conflicts. According to him, Russian political actors were able to create and maintain informal "winning coalitions" due to the limited influence of international actors, unlike Eastern European countries which are accepted within the western world today. By taking into consideration the claim that Russia was moving reverse direction compared to the democratizing Eastern European countries, Gel'man puts forward the claim that Russian rulers since 1991 have never wanted to have a democratic country. Rather, their concern was the maximization of power. The difference between Russian politics in the 1990s and that in 2000s, in other words, the distinction between Yeltsin and Putin periods in terms of Russian politics, is not a matter of change in regime, but it is a matter of state capacity. It was Putin who corrected

troubled economic transformation, achieved to build homogeneity in ruling elite and increased state capacity thanks to the steps he took just after coming to power.

Through linking the regime change to the rulers of the period, Gel'man sets us free from cultural explanations of authoritarianism in Russian politics on the one hand. By this way, he reveals that pessimist perspective on Russian politics, which explains authoritarianism through history and culture, is not a valid one. It places the role of current actors aside and believes the validity of a linear path towards nondemocratic rule. On the other hand, he also refuses a linear explanation based on modernization. Regime change from authoritarianism to democracy in Russian politics does not seem likely in close future. Depending on this analysis he states at the end of his study that "Russia, in a historical perspective, deserves to be judged as a slow developer, not as an outlier of political regime change". Thus, Gel'man's position emerges as realist perspective based on a synthesis of rational choice and historical institutionalist theoretical frameworks.

The structure of the book is organized in accordance with the critical junctures in Russian political history since 1990. In this sense, the rejection of adoption of the new Russian Constitution and of new founding elections in 1991, the conflict between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament in 1993 resulted in the dissolution of the parliament, the election of Boris Yeltsin as a result of an unfair campaign in 1996 is accepted as the junctures of the 1990s. Putin's maximization of power by compelling the loyalty of all important political, economic and societal actors, the creation of the "power vertical" in following few years, the creation of Putin-Medvedev tandem by 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 were defined as turning points in Russian politics by the new millennium. These significant junctures explained respectively in each chapter; together with the clear explanations and mellifluous language of the author accomplish an easy-reading and comprehensible study. Through these features, this study has the potential to make Russian politics visible for the students of political science and those who are interested in democratization and its authoritarian competitors.