

FROM ONE AUTHORITARIANISM TO ANOTHER AND BACK AGAIN

Review of William Zimmerman. 2014. *Ruling Russia. Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

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William Zimmerman, professor emeritus at the University of Michigan, a long standing observer and analyst of the Russian politics in his newest book traces the development of the Russian political system through different types of authoritarianisms and (limited) experimentations with democracy. Zimmerman starts with distinguishing between different types of political systems: democratic and three types of authoritarianisms (competitive, full and mobilization) which are distinguished by the status of opposition, level of electoral uncertainty, size of selectorate (who can participate in the selection of the leaders) or ejectorate (is there a possibility to remove the leaders through extralegal means, such as rallies or coups) and the goals of the regime. Competitive authoritarianism in this typology is quite close to democratic rule, only the electoral rules are often violated in favour of those in power and the opposition is limited in its expressions. Mobilized authoritarianism here roughly corresponds to the description of totalitarianism and in Russian case is epitomised by the height of Stalin's rule in 1937-1938.

After describing these different forms of rule in the introduction, Zimmerman goes through the history of Russia in the 20th and early 21st century to assess how the system looked right after the revolution, during Stalin's rule, Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's rule, Gorbachev's reforms and finally, after the collapse of the Soviet Union the period of Yeltsin's toying with democracy and going back to authoritarianism

under Vladimir Putin. It is an interesting journey through a hundred years of Russian history, permeated with pieces of information from the previous research of the author (such as the possibility to predict the increase of Soviet Union military budget from the speeches of its leaders and their mention or lack thereof of the United States), tracing of the increases and decreases of the selectorate throughout this period of time, as well as assessment of the country's future.

The book was written before the Ukraine events, but even so the author predicted the very limited chance for the country to turn back to the truly democratic system, whilst at the same time emphasizing that, as the rallies against the falsifications of the results of elections of 2011-2012 have shown, there was still a possibility for it to go back to a kind of 'competitive authoritarianism'. The author did, however, also suggest that there is a possibility for it to move back to a kind of mobilized authoritarianism and, unfortunately, the signs of such an unfavourable outcome are more numerous than those of the system becoming (somewhat more) democratic. He shows that many leaders toyed with the semi-democratic procedures of elite selection (even in the early days after the revolution, according to him, the selectorate was quite large and disagreements with the top leadership possible), each leader has been moving away from such procedures in order to reduce uncertainty in the electoral process.

Even though it was written before the murder of Boris Nemtsov, it would be interesting to assess this murder in light of insights of this book. The author emphasizes that since Stalin's death there has been an unwritten rule that members of the elite who lose in a power struggle would not suffer extremely dire consequences. In Brezhnev's time they would be even given rather comfortable ambassadorial positions in places of little strategic interest (such as Canada or Denmark). The murder of Nemtsov seems to go against this unwritten rule, raising the stakes of power struggle around Kremlin.

This book is not, however, as it was suggested elsewhere, a reading for beginners. It is rather for adepts in Russian history and politics who want to share in the views of one of the most solid Western political scientists in the area of Sovietology and Russia studies. It talks to other books, debating some rather obscure points with other authors which the reader, if s/he is not familiar with the field, can hardly take in and is even invited to ‘explore other areas of scholarship to obtain a full picture of what transpired.’ (p.64)

It has these obscure moments, the best example of which is the statement: ‘Given what Kirov is reported to have said when he was approached and asked if he would accept appointment as general secretary, certainly he, and very likely the Old Bolsheviks who approached him, did not consider the main policies associated with Stalin to have been abnormal.’ (p.79) This is the first time the reader encounters someone named Kirov and, needless to say, without having read previously about the period, one can hardly know what ‘Kirov is reported to have said’. Maybe such obscurity would work better for the newer events, such as ‘Beslan tragedy’ or ‘Beslan hostage crisis’ which is never really spelled out except for p.222 ‘hostage crisis in Beslan (a small town in North Caucasus)’ – it could be assumed that if you know what happened in Beslan, you probably also know that it is a small town in North Caucasus and if you do not, such information would hardly help.

There are periods missing from this account, the most conspicuous is that of the Second World War, the complete absence of which is never explained. At the same time, it moves from one subject to another sometimes with head spinning speed, such as when in a chapter on NEP you suddenly are left with collectivization and have to check other sources to make sure that, yes, the old schoolbook knowledge does not deceive you and it did indeed happen after, not during NEP. It has some strange twists, such as discussing everyday life for half of the chapter that is supposed to be dealing with the Great Purge (what are we to fathom

from this? That life was not so bad during Stalin's terror because workers learned to dance foxtrot in the factories?). Or some interesting logic, such as the explanation why Putin could not have been blackmailing Yeltsin with a 'kompromat' against his daughter: 'Yeltsin's daughter (in her third interview with Colton) said that "her father did not ask her opinion on the selection of Putin" – which reduces by a lot the possibility that Yeltsin's decision to appoint Putin as prime minister was driven by consideration of his daughter's well-being.' (p.226-227)

Overall, the book has its moments, its introduction and conclusions are well worth reading, its theoretical framework is robust, but this definitely should not be the first book one reads about Russian history in the 20-21st century or even the first book one reads about Russian authoritarianism unless one wants to spend a lot of additional time figuring out what it was that Kirov is supposed to have said when he was asked to become the general secretary in 1933 and especially so, if one does not even know who Kirov was.