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Contemporary Russian Conservatism. Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives

Mikhail Suslov & Dmitry Uzlaner (eds), Leiden: Brill, 2019, 384pp., £94.00/€131.00 h/b.

Elizaveta Gaufman

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litigation: more overt forms of electoral clientelism were avoided in the observed time period. As for the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ of electoral clientelism, the findings indeed run contrary to the expectations of theories based on candidates’ resource availability. Instead, hypotheses pertaining to signalling effects find more support; for example, in the case of policy coercion:

[A]lthough most voters judge clientelistic candidates harshly, in localities where there is conflict over policy resources, those who are unhappy with the current distribution of social policy benefits are willing to overlook even a strategy as noxious as welfare coercion ... As a result, welfare coercion can be used without strong electoral sanctions in localities where demographic conditions create social conflict. (p. 149–50)

By bringing an invisible practice into view, this book holds serious potential for the field. While a few aspects of the book could have been better developed (this reviewer would have welcomed a more comprehensive discussion section on empirical findings; more consideration of similarities and differences between the findings in Hungary and in Romania; and an evaluation of the electoral clientelistic trends after 2015), it represents a huge contribution both theoretically and empirically. The latter is not only to be commended because of its methodological inventiveness, but also due to the demanding original data collection strategy focusing on actual individuals—putting the ‘social’ into social scientific research. Thus, while the book’s policy proposals are rather gloomy—but realistic—I believe they may be useful for policy practitioners and activists on the ground working for fairer electoral processes. Somewhat less obviously, beyond scholars interested in clientelism, elections and electoral behaviour, this book may be helpful for students of governance, social conflicts, and the broader political economy. I, for one, found it a significant addition to my studies on populist political strategies in Hungary, as it challenged quite a few of my preconceptions. Such a theoretically and empirically inventive work will, I hope, stimulate further research besides mine—and for that, it deserves to be characterised as a pioneering contribution.

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MÁTÉ MÁTYÁS © 2021

Mikhail Suslov & Dmitry Uzlaner (eds), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism. Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives*. Leiden: Brill, 2019, 384pp., £94.00/€131.00 h/b.

THE VOLUME EDITED BY MIKHAIL SUSLOV AND DMITRY UZLANER IS, in many ways, a unique and welcome contribution to studies on conservatism. It is a sophisticated and multifaceted manuscript that is built around six issue areas: introduction to Russian conservatism (Part 1), its conceptualisation (Part 2), the post-Soviet conservative tradition (Part 3), its geopolitical dimension (Part 4), politics of memory (Part 5), and religion and traditional values (Part 6). The volume features a number of authorities in the field who expertly navigate primary source material that would be inaccessible to a reader without Russian-language skills. The volume’s contributions range in topics from historical analyses to modern debates on homosexuality, spanning centuries and themes; most importantly, the volume meticulously traces the start of the ‘conservative turn’ in Russian politics to the years 2007–2012, which had significant implications for Russian domestic and foreign politics. This conservative turn towards ‘sovereign morality’ is primarily associated with such landmark cases as

the prosecution of the feminist group Pussy Riot and the ban on ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations’. At the same time, international relations and geopolitics scholars will also find the volume particularly thought-provoking, as Russian conservatism has a significant geopolitical dimension that is torn between imperial and national subjects, between isolationism and apocalyptic imperialism (Chapter 10 and Chapter 14).

Theoretically, the volume engages with key conservative thinkers, such as Edmund Burke, Michael Freeden, Samuel Huntington and Karl Mannheim, but also brings a more unorthodox perspective with René Girard and his work on scapegoating. The volume’s Western theoretical leaning also inadvertently exposes one of the main contradictions of Russian conservatism: as an intellectual endeavour, it is a profoundly Western phenomenon that is built around anti-Westernism. Drawing on Viacheslav Morozov’s ‘Subaltern Empire’ argument, the authors argue that ‘Russia so thoroughly Westernized that the attempt to contemplate authenticity invariably boils down to anti-Westernism’ (p. 83). Meanwhile, the language and narratives used by Russian conservative ideologues is similar to those of US, French, Belgian and German alt/new right movements that are also concerned with the perceived decline of the West. Thus, a significant contribution of this volume is in placing the Russian conservative movement in a broader international context that shows how the Russian conservative tradition, despite its traditionalist claims, is inextricably bound to its image of Europe and the West.

The book reveals the inherent inconsistencies of the Russian conservative intellectual effort. At the core, Russian conservative individuals and institutions, including the Russian Orthodox Church, cannot decide which past should be conserved: the Soviet project or the imperial one (Chapter 9). One of the core tenets of conservatism is its insistence on a return to a traditional way of life, but the discontinuity of Russian history poses a threat to the ‘thousand-year history narrative’ (Chapter 11): the Soviet era, which many Russian conservative thinkers find so problematic for its relative social liberalism and modernisation, must also be incorporated if the historical narrative is to be a seamless record of superpower status.

A substantial distinguishing feature of modern Russian conservative thought highlighted by the book is its non-organic nature. Contemporary Russian conservatism as an ideology essentially serves the purpose of propping up the current ‘semi-authoritarian regime’ (p. 18). If the regime did not find their ideas politically expedient, many conservative ideologues would have hardly gained traction. For instance, Russian conservatives often decry the horrors of the ‘liberal’ Yel’tsin era, the same rhetorical strategy that President Vladimir Putin uses to maintain the legitimacy of his rule. In the context of the annexation of Crimea, conservative thought concerning Russian greatness came to the fore—as did fundamental ideological inconsistencies of the conservative movement, such as its stated confrontation with the West and its Western origins—which led to the movement’s fragmentation manifested through diverging attitudes towards the Kremlin’s Ukraine policy.

Even though the editors claim to contribute to the body of publications on the radical right (p. 9), the volume is still not entirely clear on how conservatism and the radical right interact, conceptually and empirically. For instance, Marlene Laruelle (Chapter 7) discusses the ‘mirror games’ between radical conservatives in the US and Russia, but where does conservatism end and the radical right begin? Additionally, a concluding chapter would have helped clarify the outlook for Russian conservatism. Given the state demand for their conservative ideas and a public ‘thirst’ for a ‘moral compass’ identified by the Levada Center for Public Opinion, it is unlikely that the ideas of Russian conservatism will suddenly become irrelevant, especially with Putin potentially staying in power until the year 2034. A more pressing concern is the radicalisation of conservative fractions—for instance, of the Russian Imperial Movement (*Russkoe Imperskoe Dvizhenie*) that has been deemed a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity by the US State Department—that could be potentially problematic for President Putin. In many ways, they espouse similar belief systems, but for some ultra-conservative movements, the Putin regime does not fit their traditionalist vision of Russia. As

the book shows, the Kremlin might encourage and even fund some conservative ideologists, but there is no guarantee of their loyalty to the ruling regime.

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James Henderson & Arild Moe, *The Globalization of Russian Gas. Political and Commercial Catalysts*. Cheltenham & Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2019, vi + 189pp., £75.00 h/b.

THANKS TO MASSIVE RESERVES, GEOGRAPHIC PROXIMITY TO EUROPE and existing infrastructure links, Russian gas is of key importance for European security of energy supply. Conversely, European demand remains crucially important for the Russian gas industry, despite the growing relevance of Asia. Until the mid-2000s, EU–Russian relations aimed to exploit these synergies, acknowledging the benefits of mutual interdependence. However, starting with the first Ukraine–Russia gas dispute in 2006, concerns regarding the reliability of Russian gas became a central issue in European energy policy. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 exacerbated the tensions. Negative perceptions of Russian gas dominate the debate on Europe’s external energy security. In this debate, commercial and geopolitical arguments on gas trade and investments oppose each other, often with insufficient nuance and depth. Some see Russian gas exports as a tool for geopolitical influence, others as a predominantly profit-driven activity. Objective research on the commercial and political aspects of Russian gas is needed to avoid misunderstandings over the sensitive question of energy security and EU–Russian energy dependency.

In *The Globalization of Russian Gas*, Henderson and Moe analyse the Russian gas industry and its role in the international gas market from an ‘energy-economy angle’, looking at ‘the gas industry as a provider of energy and the gas policies as a means to regulate the gas sector’ (p. 3). Inevitably, energy geopolitics is also part of the analysis. By providing a comprehensive picture of the domestic and global role of Russian gas, and engaging critically with both its political and commercial relevance in a rigorous yet succinct and accessible way, the authors—two of the most distinguished experts on Russian energy—make a unique contribution to the understanding of this strategic sector and the functioning of energy markets more generally. The book contributes to an understanding of the political, geopolitical and commercial drivers of, and obstacles to, energy market reforms and energy market integration. It helps navigate Russia’s complex energy relations with the EU, China and the US, in the context of deteriorating EU–Russia, China–US and Russia–US relations.

Gas exports are linked to the domestic structure of the Russian gas market, as export revenues are used to subsidise domestic supplies. According to this ‘social contract’ (p. 9), cross-subsidisation justifies Gazprom’s monopoly over exports. Thanks to close political connections, the ‘independent’ gas producers such as Novatek and Rosneft managed to exempt LNG terminals licensed before 2013 from the export monopoly. This enabled Russia to achieve the dual strategic objectives of expanding its geostrategic relations with more countries and developing the Russian Arctic, where the Yamal LNG project is located. A significant further reform measure would be to terminate Gazprom’s export monopoly and create an independent pipeline company, following the EU unbundling model. However, given the social contract, such a far-reaching reform measure would depend, among other things, on the readiness of independent gas producers to take on part of Gazprom’s social obligations, and on the possibility of Gazprom competing on price with the independents. More fundamentally, Henderson and Moe argue that ‘the structure of the gas sector