
BETWEEN DICTATORSHIP AND DEMOCRACY: 10 YEARS LATER

Michael McFaul, Nikolai Petrov, and Andrei Ryabov (eds) (2004). Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform. Washington Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

NEXT YEAR WILL MARK TEN YEARS OF THE PUBLICATION of an influential book about “Russian regime change” (McFaul et al, 2004: 13), entitled enigmatically *Between Dictatorship and Democracy*. This collection of essays edited by Michael McFaul, Nikolai Petrov and Andrei Ryabov has remained an accessible, thorough and compelling scholarly reference as well as a meticulous analysis of the first decade of Russia’s political transition. However, in the nine years since the book was published, there may have been political developments worth considering and our perceptions about Russian regime change also may have changed. Moreover, while most of the Russian and American contributors to this volume remain active scholars, the main editor, Michael McFaul, veered into politics to serve as the US ambassador to Russia. This turn of events is particularly interesting to a student of political science. First, one wonders to what extent *Between Dictatorship and Democracy* remains a timely analysis. Second, it provides an opportunity to see whether or not scholars-turned-politicians follow the policies they preach.¹

The book raises an important political and academic puzzle. After being ruled by dictators for hundreds of years, Russia experienced in the late 1980s political reforms that eventually allowed for competitive elections, the beginnings of an independent press, and the formation of political parties and civil society. Yet, while these democratic institutions endured in an independent Russia, the transition initiated by Gorbachev and continued under Yeltsin did not lead to liberal democracy. The question the authors ask is why that is the case and what kind of political regime took hold in post-Soviet Russia.

McFaul *et al.* present evidence of Russia’s movement away from democracy. The essential argument of the book is that after an initial democratic push in the late 1980s and early 1990s, an authoritarian revival placed Russia in the gray zone between regimes – but not in authoritarianism. This argument is not of the “transitology” genre, despite the fact that the book covers many institutional themes related to the democratization process. On the contrary, the book argues that the Russian regime may no longer be “in transition.”

¹ At the beginning of McFaul’s ambassadorial term in 2012, state controlled TV channels suggested that he was sent to Moscow to foment revolution. While his commitment to doing “our policy... in a very, very aggressive way” caused political unease, McFaul’s statements referred to Obama’s “reset policy” towards Russia. Current U.S. ambassador McFaul was the actual architect of the “reset policy.” Far from desiring to topple Putin, McFaul’s strategy has been to create conditions in which a democratic leader could emerge. This strategy is in no contradiction to the cautiously optimistic democratic prospect as presented in *Between Dictatorship and Democracy*.

The argument of *Between Dictatorship and Democracy* is divided neatly into nine constituent parts: elections, the constitution, legislative-executive relations, political parties, civil society, the mass media, the rule of law, federalism, and public attitudes about democracy. The authors attempt to compare Russia with a list of liberal democratic features and claim that while some of those components do exist in the Russian polity, antidemocratic attitudes and policies linger in elite circles and the society. The book attempts to show why the backsliding has occurred, and with what results.

Let us begin with the results. The authors agree on two general conclusions. First, Russia has experienced some degree of democratization. Political liberalization has occurred and the country underwent momentous historical developments. Second, the political regime has become less democratic under President Putin. While Putin began some legal and political reforms (e.g. the effectiveness of the state), he has been continuously introducing policies and actions that have brought about less pluralism. While the book attempts to describe the Russian political regime type, its classification is simple but inconclusive: "in between" (McFaul et al, 2004: 1). Russia's regime of 2004 is neither a full-blown dictatorship nor a consolidated democracy. Instead of placing a "simplistic label" on the Russian regime, the authors offer a description of the contours of the political regime. Moreover, the authors offer a story about negative trends, which according to them begins in the mid-1990s and accelerates under the Putin era.

A major difficulty of this book arises with the meaning behind the "negative trends". If the aim is to explain the factors that have pushed Russia's democracy in the direction of erosion, then the assumption is that some form of democracy had existed. "*Russia underwent a transition from communist rule to some form of democratic rule in the 1990s*" (McFaul et al, 2004: 2). Russia thus was an electoral democracy in the 1990s. But it is such inconsistent labeling that raises major concerns about this book. While the terminology for what counts as a democratic regime is well presented, the book lacks clear analytical criteria for differentiating among authoritarian regimes. The authors claim that Russia's regime in 2004 was not a dictatorship. The problem, however, is that the term "dictatorship" is not defined. What the authors claim is that if Russia were a dictatorship, then "*oligarchs, governors, and government officials would have not invested the time and energy that they did in the last electoral cycle (2002)*" (McFaul et al, 2004: 6). But this is not a definition of dictatorship or of authoritarianism.

Imprecise classifications are problematic. While the authors are "*not ready to call Russia an autocratic regime [...] the trend, however, is clearly in the autocratic direction*" (McFaul et al, 2004: 7). Curiously, the authors address the regime-type classification issue only in a footnote (McFaul et al, 2004: 300). There they claim that "[a]lthough sympathetic to the notion of making the category of dictatorship more nuanced [such as in *Way and Levitsky or Diamond*], we do not agree that the Russian regime should be labeled as competitive authoritarianism in part because the Russian system has more democratic features that this label implies." A first problem here is that the authors do not provide a clear definition of either authoritarianism or democracy. But, they continue, "*this label [competitive authoritarianism] puts Russia in the same category as regimes such as Iran, which to us seem to be more autocratic than Russia.*" While this comparison lacks empirical evidence, the

authors maintain that “Russia is on the borderline between electoral democracy and competitive authoritarianism” (McFaul et al, 2004: 300). And most problematic in terms of the definition is the authors’ clear assertion that “the political system that President Vladimir Putin headed at the end of his first term as president **diff-fered qualitatively** (Bold type – P.R.) from the regime that President Boris Yeltsin had bequeathed him” (McFaul et al, 2004: 300). While the main purpose of the book is to describe Russian regime change, the reader cannot determine the type of Russian political regime. In short, much depends on what a regime is compared to. The authors give the impression that Russia is compared to the communist past, rather than to other regimes in transition.

The book also suffers from under-developed causal mechanisms and bias. The authors elaborate no major causal mechanism besides a time sequence. Moreover, they claim that the book has a “Moscow-centric bias” (McFaul et al, 2004: ix). While such a position may justify a different approach to causation, it may also explain the current political approach of the current U.S. ambassador to understand and address Russia from within. Such a cautious policy orientation to avoid mislabeling the Russian regime may make sense, but it comes at the cost of scientific analysis.

Putting these minor quibbles aside, the book represents a detailed description of Russian transition from Gorbachev to Putin. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, the volume brilliantly summarizes the data and checks coherence of data with major comparative democratization theses. While no major theoretical arguments are developed and while existing theories are tested only by description, the strengths of this analysis derive, first, from the explanation of democratic backsliding. The explanation relies on structural factors, such as a non-democratic inheritance, the process of transition as protracted, conflictual, and imposed by the winners of the contests rather than negotiated, the corrupt political economy of post-communism and the reemergence of the state. While the authors account less for individuals’ actions, the differences between the leadership styles of Yeltsin and Putin are well accounted for. Finally, the authors argue well that analysts of democratization conflate two different properties: the quality of democracy and the stability of democracy. For example, they show that while the formal institutions of electoral democracy, such as the constitution, seem to be stable, the democratic content of these institutions has eroded.

In short, while Russia in 2004 may not have been a democracy, the authors were hopeful that authoritarianism had not taken place. The book confronted the views of many political scientists and policy makers, who believed that Russia had irreversibly crossed the boundary separating dictatorship from democracy. However, ten years later, are the cautious arguments of McFaul and his co-authors still compelling? For scholars they may be as convincing as is Putin’s own description of the Russian regime: “managed democracy.” For policy makers, however, cautious and non-judgmental approaches may leave the door open to potentially promising regime-change developments.