

Marcia A. Weigle. *Russia's Liberal Project: State-Society Relations in the Transition from Communism.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. xvi + 508 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-01942-0.



Reviewed by Sven Gunnar Simonsen

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Giving 'Liberal Russia' the Benefit of the Doubt

On 19 August 1991, the first day of the attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev, Marcia A. Weigle arrived at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, to start working on a project on independent political participation in the Soviet Union. What began in Moscow that day could have been the beginning of the end of all such activities in the USSR. Instead, it served to speed up the process in which the essence was precisely independence—for the individual and for the union republics.

Weigle explains that the unfolding drama in Moscow made her decide to take a step back, to view the transition from communism as a whole. Two themes gradually emerged: constructing the post-Soviet Russian state, and the significance of this process in light of Russian history. These two themes make up the starting point for *Russia's Liberal Project*. This is a book that in several ways ended up more ambitious than originally planned. It covers events starting with Gorbachev's coming to power in 1985, and even

touches on developments as recent as the August 1998 financial crisis in Russia. With this book, Weigle aims to contribute both to the 'transition literature' and to Russian studies. She does so by employing theories of political science to analyze the effort to institutionalize a liberal democracy in post-Communist Russia.

At its most condensed, Weigle defines what she calls 'Russia's liberal project' in terms of four components: the formation of a civil society, the consolidation of a multiparty parliamentary system, the construction of an effective state structure built on liberal principles, and the formation of a post-communist political culture. Weigle defines 'liberal democracy' as "'rule by the people" tempered by mechanisms of political representation and the protection of human, civil, and minority rights by laws upheld by state institutions and enforced by the coercive resources of state power.' (It never becomes quite clear, however, who exactly are the proponents of the 'liberal project'^Ö—that is, whose project it is. For instance, Weigle writes that 'Russians are struggling to implement those liberal institutions that may help

solve problems of social organization and political injustice that have plagued the country for so long' [p. 25]. From her reservations elsewhere in the book, however, it is clear that she is not suggesting that all Russians as 'the people' represent this vision.)

The book is introduced by a theoretical chapter, on 'the building blocs of the liberal model', where Weigle lays out her theoretical framework for analysis, and discusses core concepts--civil society, political society, the state, and political culture. The next two chapters cover the emergence of civil society in Soviet Russia, and political society in Soviet Russia in 1985-1991. Thereafter follow three chapters on post-Soviet Russia--the process of state building, and the attempts to institutionalize post-communist Russian political and civil society--that together make up the largest part of the book. The last chapter deals with the relationship between Russian political culture and the institutional foundations of 'Russia's liberal project'.

The assertion that Russia does indeed have a civil society, is an important point for Weigle. In her introduction, she thanks her colleague Michael McFaul for his 'support for the idea that Russia could have even the seeds of a civil society when most Sovietologists and Russian experts scoffed at the idea' (p. xv). Later, she describes a tendency among Russian and non-Russian political scientists to 'downplay the significance of this nascent civil society in propelling the demise of the communist regime' (p. 130). It appears that Weigle's emphasis on the significance of civil society is first and foremost based on her interpretation of the late Gorbachev period. If that is so, her contradiction with 'most experts' does not seem as great as she believes.

To what extent the dreams and ideals of the activists on the liberal side were later upheld by Boris Yeltsin, is a different question. Weigle appears to have a weak spot for Yeltsin: the cover of her book shows the president disco-dancing--a

memorable image from his 1996 campaign for re-election. The photograph could be seen as the image of a society's dream that burst, symbolized by Yeltsin's heart attack at the end of that election campaign. In Weigle's account, however, Yeltsin does not come out that poorly. In her introduction, she writes: 'The transition from communism and reorganization of state-society relations in post-communist Russia is part of a single experiment based on the articulation of liberal ideas in the Gorbachev period and on the attempt to put these ideals into practice, in very hostile conditions, after 1991. The apparent shift in power relations, from democratization in the Gorbachev period to "soft authoritarianism" in the post-communist period, does not represent a radical change in the configuration of power but rather different phases in the course of a single liberal project' (p. 4).

The 'hostile conditions', presumably, have been created by communist and nationalist opposition to Boris Yeltsin. That, in turn, makes it clear that the 'liberal project' has not been that of a unified Russian people. Moreover, while Weigle uses the phrase 'soft authoritarianism' to describe the Yeltsin period, she on balance seems to consider that such a political line has been justified for the sake of promoting liberal policies. To illustrate, Weigle summarizes one section by stating that 'the record shows that [President Yeltsin] did exhibit the will and the means to help shape a responsible parliament' (p. 327). This author reads history rather to the effect that Yeltsin let his decisions be influenced by the uncooperative parliament when he had to, and dictated it when he could. Agreements over budgets (one of Weigle's examples) do not go very far as evidence for his willingness to compromise, since budgets--in particular how they are adhered to--are hardly the same thing in Russia as they are in Western countries. Discussing another component for the consolidation of a liberal political society--policy-making links between the legislature and the executive--Weigle states that the dominance of

opposition parties and independents in the 1993 and 1995 Dumas 'compelled Yeltsin to maintain control over the composition of the government and the appointment of the prime minister' (p. 329). And: 'The overview of [the opposition parties^Ò] political programs illustrates the potential threat of opposition parties to the consolidation of market reforms in Russia' (p. 329). This statement does not tally completely with Weigle^Òs simultaneous description of the Duma as a forum that has been 'momentously important in promoting mediation of competing interests rather than the attempted elimination of political opposition' (author^Òs emphasis, p. 328).

While emphasizing elements of continuity from the liberalization under Gorbachev, and the existence of a nascent civil society that emerged in that period, Weigle has few illusions about the power of civil society to determine the future of Russia's 'liberal project'. If Russia's liberal project is to succeed, she writes, 'it will have to be a state-dominated liberalism, where the state establishes the institutions and practices of a liberal political system and seeks to promote an eventually self-standing civil and political system' (p. 458). Given that the state leaders^Ò willingness to limit their own power must be at the core of such a process, one may at this point be tempted to write off all hopes of a happy ending. In her short, final conclusion, Weigle herself admits that the picture of current (late Yeltsin) Russia looks 'rather bleak'. Crime, corruption, social inequality, an authoritarian-leaning executive, a weak civil society and a not very liberal political culture--these factors all add on the 'minus' side of the equation. Weigle still finds a few things to counter that image, above all, the fact that Russia still has a constitutionally liberal political system (p. 461). And she is categorically against deeming Russia's liberal project a failure so short after its inception; that would be a 'great insult' to the Russians who have struggled to promote it, and also 'methodologically unsound' (p. 462).

This is a sympathetic position, but it itself raises a methodological question: When do we have an 'outcome' to study? Weigle^Òs book considers the events up to late 1998, and many would argue that support for ideas of liberal democracy (and the belief that Yeltsin would or could provide it) began to fade already in 1992-93. Since Weigle completed her book, democracy has suffered even more setbacks. The new president was annointed by Yeltsin, and elected with a massive mobilization of the state apparatus. And it has become very clear that Vladimir Putin himself does not see any particular value in an independent civil society. There is little reason to expect any progress for liberal democracy in Russia in the near future. Whether that signifies a temporary setback or the failure of a 'project' may in part be a matter of definition. But it certainly reminds us that a 'transition' does not always go in one direction. Some uses of this word seem to imply a pleasant, teleological perspective where a state by necessity ends up with a liberal democratic political system and a market economy.

The author^Òs use of theoretical literature to shed light on events in the 1980s and 1990s is commendable. It is time to go beyond mere description of this period, and try to learn more general lessons. Relating this period in Soviet/Russian history to theories, models, and generalizations based on other cases will help us figure out just how unique this case is, and what is to be learnt from it. This book is an effort to make sense of state-society relations in this period, and it does provide the reader with many valuable observations and analytical conclusions on the way. Parallel to its broad chronological flow, the book is organized according to the theoretical issues discussed, and introductory and concluding sections to each chapter provide yardsticks reminding the reader of the arguments that are being made. Perhaps it is the parallel ambition to contribute not only to the 'transition literature' but also to the academic field of Russian studies that ultimately prevents this book from being as clear as it could

have been, in terms of theoretical conclusions. Weigle herself points out that it has been necessary to strike a balance between detail and scope--to flesh out arguments, and to make the broader points. Nevertheless, the balance between theory and empirical description sometimes tilts far towards the latter, with long passages that by themselves provide interesting information, but are not essential for the general thrust of the book. Several long, mostly descriptive sections could have been shortened to sharpen its focus.

More careful editing would also have contributed to making this book a smoother read. The most obvious examples are the countless misspellings (and inconsistent transliterations) of Russian names; thus we run into Migranin (Migranian), Gregor (Grigory) Yavlinksy (Yavlinsky), Edgar (Yegor) Gaidar, Chernomyrdin (Chernomyrdin), Zhuganov (Zyuganov), and so on.

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