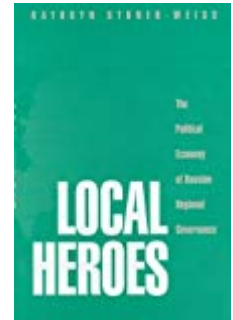


Kathryn Stoner-Weiss. *Local Heroes: The Political Economy of Russian Regional Governance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. xvii + 240 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-01195-0.



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Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the world has watched the Russian people and their leaders scramble to find new ways of governing themselves. Lurching from crisis to crisis, the Moscow authorities seem unequal to the task. As power has leaked from Moscow to the provinces, one wonders whether provincial-level governing authorities are having any more luck than their hapless Moscow counterparts.

Kathryn Stoner-Weiss addresses this question in a methodologically sophisticated book. Her masterful study compares four selected Russian oblast' (province) governments to find out what works and what does not at that level. She finds that although some provincial governing authorities seem almost as ineffective as the central government, others oblast' authorities seem surprisingly more effective. There is, in fact, effective governing going on in Russia, at least at the provincial level, at least in some provinces.

How to measure provincial governing effectiveness? Stoner-Weiss follows the lead of Robert Putnam's pathbreaking study of Italian regional government.[1] She devises and applies more

than a dozen "performance indicators" to four selected oblasts. The four oblasts she chose are: Nizhnii-Novgorod, Tiumen', Yaroslavl, and Saratov. Stoner-Weiss' dozen performance indicators are selected to measure decisional effectiveness and responsiveness. Among the indicators are delays in making key decisions (an indicator of dissension within the polity); ability to raise a quorum for meetings of the oblast' legislature (an indicator of the professionalization of political life in the oblast'); fit between the oblast' legislators' self-declared policy priorities, on one hand, and the decisions taken by the legislature, on the other hand (an indicator of policy implementation effectiveness); and citizen satisfaction with legislative actions correlated with objective measures of performance (an indicator of responsiveness).

Stoner-Weiss' methodological discussion of these performance indicators is first-rate. She carefully develops a democratic theory basis for them, looks at Putnam's and other scholars' work, discards or adapts their concepts to the Russian provincial case as needed, takes care to show the sources of data, ranks the four chosen oblasts,

presents the material in table or chart format, and proceeds on logically to the next indicator. The author's statistical analysis is straightforward, not relying upon more than simple rankings on a scale of one to four. The highest ranking oblast in the author's study, Nizhnii-Novgorod, was governed at that time by Boris Nemtsov, a once and future heir apparent to President Yeltsin. Stoner-Weiss comments on how well Nemtsov was running his province.

Having found a pattern of governing effectiveness among the four oblast authorities, the next question is how to account for the pattern.

Variation cannot be explained by constitutional structure, because all four oblasts are essentially similar in this respect. (An earlier chapter provides an excellent introduction and analysis of the changes in the structure of local government from the Soviet to the early post-Soviet period.) Stoner-Weiss then turns to testing theories of performance variation based on economic, on social-structural, and on cultural hypotheses. These hypotheses are drawn from the larger comparative politics literature on democratization. Although they, collectively, shed some light upon the question of performance variation, none explains it satisfactorily.

Re-examining the data and casting about for other social science hypotheses, Stoner-Weiss observes that those oblasts perform better in areas where there is a higher concentration of power among regional political and economic elites. As she states, "The more concentrated the regional economy, the more cooperative were economic and political elites, and the higher was regional government performance as a result" (p. 165). It works roughly like this: "Cooperation between economic and political actors fostered higher levels of institutional performance by enabling the state to call upon the political authority of key groups of economic actors in return for granting them systematic access to state resources. The result, at least in the short term, was consensus and

relative stability in a highly transitional political and economic environment, leading in turn to higher regional government performance" (p. 165).

This conclusion is as surprising to her as it is unsettling, because it suggests that a "company town" model of local government "works" best, or at least better, than where there is greater intra-elite competition, preferred in pluralist democratic theory. Stoner-Weiss attempts, with some success, to place her findings within the body of democratic and market transition literature, relying especially upon the consequences of the weakness of Russian civil society. Order does have its place, and in difficult transition times, there is something to be said for effective governmental performance.

The study ends at this point. It started out as a dissertation and covers its chosen ground excellently. Early in the study, Stoner-Weiss takes pains to note that her choice of performance indicators measures decisional efficacy and responsiveness, rather than legitimacy and stability. The former pair, efficacy and responsiveness, suit her concern about the quality of governance in Russia (how well is Russia governed). The latter pair, legitimacy and stability, speak more to questions raised by theories of democracy and transitions to democracy. Stoner-Weiss's "company town" conclusions therefore need to be read as a product of her effectiveness concerns. It is possible that performance indicators selected to measure legitimacy and stability might shed additional light upon the "company town" conclusion.

It is easy to see where the author or others could take this study's conclusions and the author in fact points the way: using business-government relations literature and inquiring into the relationship between regional elite cooperation and national-level inter-elite conflict. The study covers the period of the First Republic, 1991-93 only, and so the regions could be re-visited to see how they fared under periods of Yeltsin's heightened.

This study is an excellent example of the application of contemporary social science methodological concerns to the study of Russian politics. Its chapters on measuring institutional performance and on testing performance theories will become classics in their field.

Note

[1]. Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

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