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Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield. How Russians Understand the New Russia: Consolidation and Contestation. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025. xvii + 188 pp. ISBN 9780691258669.

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In their book *How Russians Understand the New Russia: Consolidation and Contestation*, Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield attempt to describe Russian politics through the prism of a collection of public opinion surveys conducted between 1993 and 2021. The rich survey data on which the book is based is its main and most obvious strength. Notably, the authors have made both the data and a codebook publicly available. This enables readers not only to replicate the analysis presented in the book but also to draw on the data for their own research needs. That said, the book may not offer sufficient depth for readers already well familiar with Russian politics.

The book consists of seven chapters, along with introduction and conclusion sections. The introduction and chapter 1 present the main argument: Prior to the 2011–2012 protests against the fraudulent results of the parliamentary and presidential elections, public support for the Russian political regime rested on its hybrid nature—a system that was nominally democratic and market-based but functioned in an authoritarian manner. However, the protests of 2011–2012 disrupted this status quo, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought to the forefront a return to Soviet values that polarized Russian society (see pp. 6, 11). This argument is conveyed in an observational style. The authors do not delve into the mechanisms that sustained public consensus prior to 2011–2012, nor do they trace in detail how societal divisions unfolded following the annexation of Crimea.

Chapter 2 outlines patterns identified in survey research on Russian public opinion and traces the evolution of research on Russian public opinion since 1991. It also introduces the data underlying the book: 12 nationally representative surveys conducted in 1993, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2021. Here, the authors discuss some properties of mass surveys in Russia, arguing that they had been a valid instrument, at least until the fall of 2021, with relatively low nonresponse rates (pp. 38–39).

In chapter 3, Chaisty and Whitefield define and empirically operationalize three ideological groups within Russian society that they see as central to the country's political dynamics: anti-system market democrats (also referred to as market democrats), anti-system statist authoritarians (also referred to as statist authoritarians), and system consolidators (pp. 43, 50). Anti-system market democrats are described as individuals who support markets and democracy in principle but reject their flawed implementation in Russia. Anti-system statist authoritarians reject both the ideals and practices of democracy and markets. System consolidators, by contrast, support both the ideals of democracy and the market, as well as the way democracy and the

market economy function in Russia. Although the construction of these categories could be improved, for example, by including attitudes toward the president alongside views on the political and economic system, there is certainly merit in this classification, as it simplifies the broad ideological spectrum of Russian society into a few intuitive and easy-to-grasp categories.

Chapter 4 addresses policy areas that generate contestation in Russian society. It documents attitudinal changes following the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially after the 2011–2012 protests. However, the chapter stops short of linking these changes to the country's internal political dynamics. As a result, some shifts are presented as seemingly inevitable outcomes of larger historical forces. At the same time, many of these changes, such as the rise of conservative "traditional values," were actively promoted from above as a response to the growing opposition movement. These conservative changes then crystallized into a broader state strategy (see Greene and Robertson 2019; Smyth 2020).

Chapters 5 and 6 analyze electoral behavior: which political forces Russians support (chapter 5), and why they show up to the polls or abstain (chapter 6). Like chapter 4, these chapters primarily catalogue changes in attitudes without embedding them in broader contexts. For example, the book does not even mention the influence of Alexei Navalny's initiatives, including his 2011 campaign encouraging voters to support any party but the pro-regime United Russia or the "smart voting" strategy (a voting coordination tool enabling dissenting citizens to back non–United Russia candidates in majoritarian districts) that was in use during the 2021 legislative elections (see Gel'man 2015:117–118; 2022:28). Nor is there discussion of recent scholarship examining the role of civic duty in voting behavior, particularly among regime opponents (see Reuter 2021).

Chapter 7 focuses on Russian national identities. This is the area where deeper reflection on the data could have strengthened the analysis. The authors observe a resurgence of Soviet identity in the 2021 survey and attribute this trend to the annexation of Crimea (pp. 128, 139). This is a plausible hypothesis, but a discussion of the survey data would have been useful. For instance, in the 2012 survey (which recorded the lowest level of Soviet identity), 26.7 percent of respondents were aged 18–29, and 21.3 percent were over 60. In the 2021 survey, those figures were 17.2 and 27.2 percent, respectively. Since older respondents are more likely to identify with the Soviet Union (as noted by the authors on p. 130), the change in age composition could partly explain the observed trend. Additionally, the book does not address the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have lowered trust in state institutions and contributed to a resurgence of Soviet identity as a form of protest. At the same time, the authors have discussed Russian citizens' grievances toward state authorities' approach to COVID-19 elsewhere (Chaisty et al. 2021).

As I noted earlier, the book's key strength lies in its extensive survey data. However, the presentation of this data can occasionally be misleading. The authors use varying *y*-axis scales even in direct comparisons. For instance, in figure 7.3, differences between anti-system statist authoritarians and system consolidators regarding national identity may appear skewed because of inconsistent *y*-axis scaling:

Panel (a) ranges from 0 to 0.8, while panel (b) ranges from 0.2 to 0.55. In addition, the authors use equal spacing along the *x*-axis when the time intervals differ, which may exaggerate the perceived rate of change.

Overall, *How Russians Understand the New Russia* offers a reasonably accurate portrait of Russian public opinion between 1993 and 2021. However, it does not always contextualize its rich data to a degree that would benefit readers unfamiliar with Russian political context. Nevertheless, the book, and especially the accompanying survey data, represents a valuable resource for scholars interested in Russian public opinion.

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