Cultures of power in post-communist Russia

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BOOK REVIEW


Michael Urban researches cultures of power in post-Communist Russia by first setting a model of political discourse, which can potentially be used to analyse political communications in different contexts and settings. In this case, the entire book is based on a set of interviews with Russian politicians. Naturally, then, the book is a public discourse analysis that uses narratives and places the comments into a proper political context. The author acknowledges that his study is not the first of its kind, investigating the connections between objective networks and subjective elite orientations in Russia, but claims that originality comes from using the methodology in a way that would put a different focus on the problem. He uses an active and engaged way of conducting interviews in order to make the process as productive as possible. It is true that the methodology employed by Urban differs significantly from what we usually see in the research on Russian politics. The author attempts to reconstruct the subjectivity of Russia’s political elites by focusing on language constructs as a way to express culture and meaning.

There are numerous interesting points that the author makes based on the interviews or highlights with the help of the interviewers’ responses. Just a few of these points will be highlighted and commented upon here. Urban notes that his interviewees demonstrate almost uniform disregard for the law, even as some of them “lament its absence” (p. 10). The author attributes this imbalance in discourse to patterns of prevalent social relations. It could also be, however, that this “disregard” has a logical explanation, which may be different from what the author has in mind. The interviewees do not regard the law as the basis, as something given almost from above, an absoloution. Instead, they regard the law as a piece of text printed on a fine quality paper, and if it does not reflect the reality, it is almost useless. For them, the law is not about setting the rules of the game and then enforcing them at any price for the public good and betterment of the society. They believe in the contextualisation of the legislative process. Such an explanation resolves the puzzle of the contradiction between the Russians’ disregard towards the law and acknowledgement of the need for a stronger state and better and more effective law enforcement.

Interviewees comment on the importance of the perceived level of the authority and access to the Russian president: “And they all thought we could request apartments from him, pay raises and, the main thing, we could get him to sign a complaint against the Rector of Moscow University or any other big official like that which would remove him from office straightaway . . .” (p. 127). In reality, it might be easier to remove from the office such a high-ranked state bureaucrat, as for instance, the Mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, than to make an attempt on the authority of the Rector of Moscow State University, Victor Sadovnichy.

Urban offers a passage from one interviewee commenting:

They were excessively naïve . . . In 1990, Jeffrey Sachs appeared in Moscow and so did the firm, Goldman Sachs. I had to explain to a whole bunch of well-known political actors that they were not half-brothers as some of them had thought. The level of understanding capitalism was completely nil. All their knowledge had come from [Soviet] textbooks. They had never lived under capitalism as
I had, nor at that time could most of those instituting the reforms read English well enough to comprehend complex economic texts. No one had Western education. (p. 162)

Almost a quarter of a century later, one could say in the affirmative that the situation is not much better now, at least in the part of comprehending complex economic texts and having Western education. Other interesting points include Urban’s discussions of issues such as clan politics (p. 26), loyalty (p. 187), morality as loyalty (p. 111), and “Potemkin villages” of formally adopted reforms (p. 102). A passage from Leon Trotsky on privatisation (p. 74), given by one of the interviewees, is right on point.

What remains unclear is why the interviews are anonymous, as the interviewees do not say anything that would jeopardise their position. The author lists the interviewees in the appendix, but it would be much more interesting for readers who are familiar with Russian politics to know who exactly says what. The work is all about political discourse, syntax, expressions, special Russian terminology, political jargon, and lengthy explanations of terms (see, for instance, edinomyshlennikov, p. 168). Despite these explanatory excursions, some expressions are not clear. For instance: “... pull the caftans from the fire” (p. 168). Perhaps, the author means cashtans [Russian for chestnuts] instead of caftans [old traditional Russian coats or suits]?

Overall, the author does a great job in covering the “revolutionary-romantic” (p. 169) notion through interviews. It was an exciting time, indeed. People were inspired by the notion of change per se, including both Perestroika and the market transition that followed, but they generally did not like the results of this dramatic systemic transformation. Urban concludes the volume with the eternal Russian questions: “What to do?”, and “Who is to blame?”, showing that the case of Russia “reveals a critical consideration for the progress of democratic transformation: a space within elite political discourse for the immaterial power of the people” (p. 189). The book presents the opinions of those who have been making Russian politics for the past quarter century. Thus, it is highly recommended for those interested in the insiders’ views on the “kitchen” of Russian politics.

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