

Oligarchs, Retread Nomenklaturshchiki, Clansmen, Warlords, and Polyarchs: Five Divergent Paths to the Russian Future

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The preceding articles present radically different views of the post-Soviet Russian political economy. Indeed, reading these materials leaves an impression, at times, that the authors are hardly discussing the same country. Taken together, they highlight various fault lines in our understanding of what has been taking place in Russia over the past decade or more. The contributions explicate differences of opinion about post-Soviet Russia precisely because their authors often cover similar ground. All of the authors deal in one way or another with relations among subsystem groups, for example, as well as between such groups and the system as a whole. Implicitly—and at times quite explicitly—the concept of “interest groups” stands at the center of disagreement.

Lynn Nelson and Irina Kuzes are most forthright in their exploration of the place of interest in the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian political systems. They quite naturally refer to the classic volume edited by Gordon Skilling and Franklyn Griffiths entitled *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics*, published in 1971 by Princeton University Press. As a product of the same University of Toronto Department of Political Economy that produced *Interest Groups*, I was always cognizant of a dissonance between Gordon Skilling’s sophisticated presentation of group approaches to Soviet politics and the caricatured version that scholars elsewhere always threw back at Skilling—either in praise or condemnation. I often thought that that erudite chronicler of the 1968 Czech revolution must have been less than pleased at times by his identification with an approach to Soviet politics that bespoke pluralism.

The fact that a primary editor and contributor to *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics* might flee from the implications of a work never intended to be taken to its logical extreme is hardly remarkable. More interestingly, *Interest Groups* is one

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of the few collections of articles that I have ever read in which one of the editors—Franklyn Griffiths—disputes the very premise of his own volume. Griffiths's masterly debunking of the very book he edits helps identify various moments of dispute in the contributions to follow. Griffiths begins as follows:

The endeavor to employ interest group conceptions in the analysis of contemporary Soviet politics must provoke a sense of uncertainty in the researcher. Not only do Soviet realities resist any ready transference of notions which are derived largely from American experience, but the available theories of group politics and interest groups have notable deficiencies which have to be dealt with. (335)

He then continued on to set forth quite concisely the nub of the problem:

It is an innate supposition of the group approach that the process through which policies are formed is essentially subsystem-dominant, in that the working of the system as a whole is to be explained in terms of the interaction of its subsystems such as interest groups, government institutions, and the political leadership. . . . An alternative approach to the data of Soviet intermediate activity might be to begin with the assumption of system-dominance." (335–36)

Which is precisely what Griffiths does,

From this standpoint, Soviet policy-making on a given issue is to be regarded as a process in which the interaction among individuals who articulate policy expectations results in the emergence of, and selection from, a series of alternate possible directions of value allocation—tendencies of articulation—for Soviet society. The evidence which might normally be viewed in terms of interest group conflict may instead be treated in terms of conflicting tendencies in the articulations of intermediate participants on given issues. Rather than seek to determine how and with what success one interest group makes claims upon other groups and upon the political leadership, the data of Soviet group relations—organization and organizational resources, expertise, career patterns, ideological orientation, social status, access, and so on—may more profitably be employed to help explain the genesis and outcome of the tendency conflicts through which specific Soviet policies are made. (336–37)

In other words, Griffiths is arguing that an analysis of Soviet subsystem groups would reveal rather little about how those at the systemic table of power resolved their differences, but rather more about the content of the policy choices through which their power disputes were played out. Interest group politics in the Soviet Union remained quite distinct from interest group politics in, say, the mid-twentieth century United States. The system dominated subgroups in the Soviet case, not the other way around. This elemental perception suggests that analysts had walked through the looking-glass when they began to discuss interest articulation in the Soviet system.

Nelson and Kuzes help us understand why this is so, and what the implications of the Soviet Union's peculiar system of interest articulation would be two decades after Griffiths's work, when the system collapsed. The Soviet system was predicated on an assumed unity of interest between the Communist Party and the Soviet people. The party held a monopoly on power because it represented the singular and unified interests of the people. No matter how much tinkering could—and did—take place around the edges, there was no room in the found-

ing ideology of the Soviet state for the legitimate divergence of interests. As a result, as Nelson and Kuzes and others have argued, relinquishing the party's monopoly position with the retraction of Article 6 of the Soviet constitution withdrew the ideological linchpin of the Soviet state system. Perestroika could not lead to a more open or democratic Soviet state until and unless the complexity of societal interests was recognized. Yet to recognize those interests necessarily negated the privileged position of the Communist Party. As Nelson and Kuzes note, this profound contradiction "would effectively obstruct efforts to establish a coherent reform course, and it would ultimately contribute to the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself."

Griffiths, once again, comes to mind. Despite his criticism of interest group approaches to Soviet politics, he acknowledged that

the social, economic, and technological changes that have attended the modernization of the USSR have led to social and functional differentiation and have thus produced potential intermediate participants in large numbers. Simultaneously, the increased social and technological complexity of policy-making may be regarded as having led to an overloading of centralized policy-making facilities. A devolution of participation was required particularly where technical-issues were involved. . . . [I]nternal division in the party leadership would appear to have been an essential pre-condition for intermediate participation [and] the withdrawal of terror as a ready instrument of leadership control [enabled intermediate participation, as did the] relative improvement in the international situation of the Soviet Union. (373–75)

One might also add resource allocation disputes to Griffiths's list, as Nelson and Kuzes do in their article. In the end, to return to Griffiths,

to speak of a widening gap between state and society is to regard Soviet political structure essentially in terms of elite and non-elite. When intermediate participation is introduced, the picture becomes somewhat more complex and, it is suggested, true to life. (375–76)

In their article, Nelson and Kuzes demonstrate just how complex the picture would become by the late 1980s. A number of questions follow. What about interest group politics in post-Soviet Russia? Has there been a shift toward pluralism in post-Soviet Russia? Has a fundamental shift taken place in which the interaction of subsystems can explain the behavior and performance of the system as a whole? Or, despite everything that has transpired over the past decade, do the causal arrows still essentially point in the other direction? The articles offered here provide strikingly different answers to these questions, and in so doing, offer quite different views on both the nature of the Russian political system and the prospects for Russian democracy.

Nelson and Kuzes attempt to extend their analysis of late-Soviet interest articulation into the post-Soviet period, at least in reference to Russia. Seeking continuity, they find it.

The corporatist structure that characterizes political and economic relations in Russia today bears striking resemblance, in its general form, to that which prevailed in the Soviet Union of 1985—before Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost' initiatives. Overall, sectoral groups (remnants of the old USSR branch ministry system) and

regional interest groups remain the most powerful, and their lobbying system is largely intact, although the CPSU is no longer a part of the network and key new channels for interest representation have appeared.

Privatization for Nelson and Kuzes becomes a means for the securing an ordering of the interest group hierarchy that began to take shape under Gorbachev, often with younger generations of nomenklatura elites replacing their elders. Russians may, in fact, be living their lives differently than a decade ago, but the political system remains fundamentally unchanged in so far as interest articulation is concerned. Where there has not been continuity with the Gorbachev period, Nelson and Kuzes continue, it has been in those areas of institutional reform in which Gorbachev attempted to broaden representative politics. Democratic rhetoric aside, the end product of the Yeltsin administration for Nelson and Kuzes has been a system in which the most influential groups inside Russia “have been those wanting both vigorous state sponsorship in their pursuit of their objectives and insulation from the encompassing interests focus that prevailed earlier in the USSR.” The result is not the emergence of an environment based on the complexity of divergent societal interests, but rather a new system of oligarchs in which one or other interest subsystem seeks to become system dominant.

If Nelson and Kuzes update the old Russian tale of “fathers and sons,” Vladimir Brovkin is writing about wives, nephews, and cousins—about clans. Brovkin initially describes discontinuity rather than continuity despite his acknowledgment that the privatization of state assets began perhaps as early as the 1970s. He argues that state authority collapsed in 1991 with the Soviet Union. What ensued, he writes “was a free-for-all—a rise in crime, theft of state assets, and a redivision of property comparable only to that under the Bolsheviks.” Not only did the system no longer dominate the subsystems, it ceased to exist. State collapse left a playing field open for the disrespect for authority, the blurring of public and private realities, and the unhindered pursuit of personal gain that Brovkin describes so tellingly. A new form of authoritarianism is taking shape in Russia as a consequence of this fragmentation, a form tied to the domination of economy and ruling structures by organized crime. Again, to draw on Griffiths, a dominating system has emerged that has been able to assert its will over component subsystems.

Study of Brovkin’s criminal post-Soviet Russian state system may require the study of its component parts. As with Kuzes and Nelson, privatization of state property between 1992 and 1995 emerges as the critical moment in the tale, one in which the possibility for a more diffuse and pluralistic Russia is lost. Nevertheless, for Brovkin, the dominant elites and groups are not necessarily those that dominated the system in the past and their offspring, as Nelson and Kuzes maintain. Rather, Brovkin sees the dominance of such formerly low level police, military, and customs officials together with criminal elements against whom the system’s former elites were too weak to protect themselves and their interests. Local and regional elites, not the sons and daughters of Brezhnev-era Central Committee nomenklaturshchiki, dominate Brovkin’s smash and grab, post-Soviet Klondike. By failing to appreciate this reality, Brovkin concludes, Western governments and

international assistance agencies and their advisors have facilitated the operations of Russian mobsters. As with Griffiths' quarter-century-old critique of Western interest group theory, Brovkin argues that Russian realities resist any ready transference of notions that are derived largely from North American experience.

Stephen Blank explicitly states the logical extension of the approaches taken by Nelson, Kuzes, and Brovkin in the very first sentence of his contribution, which reads: "As Russia lurches from crisis to crisis, it is difficult to be optimistic about its evolution toward democracy." Like Brovkin—and Griffiths so long before—Blank views Russia as an "exception to Western economic and political theories about the global triumph of democracy and liberal capitalism." Blank leaves little doubt about his own position, arguing that the state—often in the form of the so-called power ministries—dominates whatever groups may exist in Yeltsin's Russia. Blank's post-Soviet Russia is a "conceptual monstrosity" that, like Soviet Russia before it, eludes the easy application of approaches to political analysis developed to explain the mid-twentieth century United States.

Once again, privatization stands at the center of the post-Soviet narrative. For Blank—as for Nelson, Kuzes, and Brovkin—"Privatization, as its beneficiaries admit, was and remains a corrupt process." Unlike the previous authors, Blank's analysis points in the direction of long-term state collapse rather than to state domination. Factions, groups, fragmented elite groups, "mafia" bands, media moguls, and competing power centers have overwhelmed a state that is "essentially undergoverned, incompletely legitimated, and undefined." Blank's Russia hardly has a "system" to dominate over its component "subsystems." Perversely, traditional interest group analysis breaks down as the consequent Hobbsean war of all against all leaves little room for the interaction between system-dominant state institutions, and societal-based subsystem groups. Blank's Russia resembles an "African model" in which, he argues, there is no state capable of establishing coherent and constant rules under which an orderly exercise of interest is even possible. The consequent vacuum may be all too easily filled by warlords with nuclear weapons, a sobering vision indeed.

Blank finds answers to questions about Russia's future in its past—as well as in today's so-called "Third World"—rather than in Western social science theory and research methods based on the experiences of advanced democracies and post-industrial economies. He thus takes elements of the positions and arguments found in Nelson, Kuzes, and Brovkin to their maximum limits.

Dmitri Glinski and Peter Reddaway more fully develop the importance of Russian history for interpreting its future. Glinski and Reddaway, among all the authors here, are least concerned with interest groups—although, as will become apparent in a moment, such groups nonetheless have a place in their analysis. For Glinski and Reddaway, the primary Russian narrative must be one of cyclical collapse rather than any notion of linear progress in the direction of a single universal standard.

Glinski and Reddaway's approach conforms to a venerable tradition of historians and observers who detect a pattern of repeated—and, at best, only partially

successful—rounds of Russian reforms. The incapable Russian state suffers periodic crisis in floundering efforts to generate governmental revenues, chronic inability to ensure the fiscal base for political power, and frequent failure to resolve even the most immediate tasks required for the fulfillment of government's daily functions. Foreign policy crises of one sort or other eventually push minor failure to the point of systemic crisis. Faced with defeat and loss at the hands of its neighbors, the Russian state falls back on autocratic bureaucratic measures to stave off short-term disasters. Such measures undermine longer term strategies to nurture the sort of "vibrant, economically active, and political influential civil society" required for long-term success. Deeply ingrained historical memory only reinforces a "zero-sum" mentality among elites that, in the end, insures the incomplete nature of all reform efforts. Gorbachevian perestroika represents yet one more such deficient Russian encounter with an ever-changing world.

Glinski and Reddaway explore the significance of all-or-nothing attitudes forged by an unending tension between reform and retrenchment. Glinski and Reddaway also identify proto-interest groups as they move in their analysis through the Soviet period toward perestroika and state collapse. They are particularly concerned with the development of a late-Soviet-era middle class that possessed few genuinely private assets. Whatever growing space for autonomous citizen action that may have existed collapsed in the wake of so-called "shock therapy" policies that destroyed savings for all but a few. Economic reform became yet another manifestation of the Russian proclivity toward "zero-sum" political games. Privatization—once again a critical moment in post-Soviet Russian development—took place in a manner that "allowed the morally bankrupt managerial bureaucracy to become de facto private owners of most of the capital." The end result has been a debilitated system of state power as well as a class of "New Russians" who are neither defenders nor supporters of the new regime. Glinski and Reddaway remain less hyperbolic in their prose than Blank, perhaps, but their ultimate vision of the Russian future is equally troubling in its own way.

Virginie Coulloudon argues in a very different direction from that of her co-contributors, one which leads toward a dramatically different Russia. Coulloudon is careful not to overstate Russia's transition toward democratic institutions. Her official Russians "sometimes seem to let themselves be guided by arbitrariness," while the "notion that the rule of law should prevail over private interests" remains "new" and is "shared by only a few politicians." Unlike her colleague contributors, however, Coulloudon detects a distinctly Russian vision of democracy. Beginning with little more than a scent of Blank's gloom and doom, Coulloudon states that Russia now has a Constitutional Court acting as a supreme judicial authority, a freely elected president acting as a chief executive, a democratically elected parliament elaborating new legislation, and a free press denouncing abuses of authority. Her portrayal of Russia is one in which subsystem interests begin to dominate over system interests, in which the stirring of pluralistic institutions protect the rights and interests of a variety of groups. The end of Coulloudon's road to Russia's future may not be the United States of the mid-

twentieth century, but nonetheless will feature a democratic polity in which the application of interest group approaches would be appropriate.

Recognizing the importance of individuals rather than laws in post-Soviet Russia, Coulloudon sets out to examine the extent to which Soviet nomenklatura elites are reproducing themselves in post-Soviet guise (à la Nelson and Kuzes, Glinski and Reddaway), or, alternatively, new processes of elite turnover are creating “a new elite holding a new set of attributes” (à la Brovkin and even Blank). Drawing on the work of Olga Kryshchanovskaia, Iurii Baturin, Angus Roxburgh, Barbara Green, Boris Kagarlitsky, Konstantin Mikiulsky, and others, Coulloudon dispassionately sets forth the arguments among Russian and Western advocates of theories of elite reproduction and their counterparts advancing elite circulation theories. Coulloudon develops and elaborates her own position by examining a profusion of fluid elite networks centered, initially, around the newly minted post-Soviet banks and FIGs (Financial Industrial Groups) that arose, yet again, in conjunction with Russia’s privatization program. More than Nelson and Kuzes’ oligarchs, Glinski and Reddaway’s retread nomenklaturshchiki, Brovkin’s clansmen, and Blank’s warlords, Coulloudon’s elite groups represent ever-changing coalitions of individuals and institutions reminiscent of Robert Dahl’s “polyarchs.” For Coulloudon, coherent groups are forming around networks of interests that, while coherent, constantly change members and positions. Most significantly, as was the case with the political milieu of David Truman’s original interest groups, elite clusters share fundamental values. Immediate gain, varied personalities, styles, and behavior explain reshuffling personnel and policies rather than primordial battles over values and identity. Coulloudon’s elite groups are but a few short steps short of Truman’s interest groups. Russia is no longer on the other side of the analytic looking-glass.

Coulloudon is hardly a cockeyed optimist. Traditional patterns of Russia’s political culture—most especially an avoidance of transparency in nearly all endeavors—bespeak an emerging elite system that fundamentally differs from Western lobbies.

Lack of transparency is perhaps what differentiates most Russian elite groups from Western lobbies. In contemporary Russia, it is still impossible to make one’s money yield a profit without negotiations at some point with state agents. . . . The constant struggle between elite groups to appoint their protégés to strategic posts does not challenge the legitimacy of the state. On the contrary, it helps to strengthen it.

Coulloudon’s response to Blank’s and Glinski and Reddaway’s incapable state is an emerging, distinctly Russian system of elite mediation that creates a context for democratic development. Looking at much the same evidence as Nelson, Kuzes, Brovkin, Blank, Glinski, and Reddaway, Coulloudon ends up at a starkly different end point.

Taken together, the contributors featured here clarify some of the ambiguities in current debates over post-Soviet Russian politics. They set forth very different portraits of Russian realities. Taking Nelson and Kuzes’ continuity argument to an extreme, Russia is experiencing the emergence of a system in which a variety of conflicting interests are recognized, but subsystem groups nonetheless remain sub-

ordinate to system dominant oligarchs who have been recast, sometimes quite directly, from the old regime. Their end point is hardly liberal democracy.

Brovkin similarly fails to discern a happy ending to his story, concluding instead that, "The Russian government is the conglomeration of criminal-corporatist political clans engaged in a constant struggle for power." Curiously, Brovkin's Russia lends itself to the study of subsystems—his political clientelistic networks—in order to appreciate the system in its entirety. The conclusion of present development is hardly the liberal pluralism of David Truman as Brovkin's Russian filter so distorts social science theory as to produce an image that is grotesque beyond feeble Western imaginations.

Blank's post-Soviet Russia transcends interest approaches, looking instead to tsarist patrimonial rule, Ivan Groznyi's Oprichnina, and Nigeria's coup commanders. Seemingly permanent poverty, permanent violence, lack of control, and collapsing notions of national responsibility signify state collapse with post-Soviet warlords filling remaining power-vacuums. Blank's Russia forces the abrogation of models developed to explain politics in the relatively stable systems of advanced capitalist states.

Glinski and Reddaway expound the importance of historical perspectives for an appreciation of Russia's present, exploring what they see as a recurring cycle of failed reform and counterreform throughout much of Russian history. Like Blank, they see the danger of state collapse while, like Nelson and Kuzes, they detect the re-emergence of Soviet-era retread nomenklaturshchiki at post-Soviet Russia's commanding heights.

Coulloudon's vision of a distinctly Russian form of political and economic pluralism stands in contrast to her colleagues' pessimism. Her Russia is too dynamic and expansive to languish in marginalized backwaters, and her elites too astute to fall prey for too long to a continuing bacchanalia of violence and piracy. Russian tradition and culture matter for Coulloudon—as they do to all of the authors under consideration—but her emerging post-Soviet Russian polyarchy will be one in which there will be a place for the application of Western models of political behavior such as interest group approaches.

All of the authors represented here argue that Russia's post-Soviet political, economic, and social realities have given rise to new power and social structures that demand mediation and compromise. The issue at hand is whether such negotiation takes place through violence, coercion, or more peaceful and transparent processes. Nelson, Kuzes, Brovkin, Blank, Glinski, Reddaway, and Coulloudon complete their analytic journeys at strikingly different destinations—ranging from Nigerian-style state collapse and warlordism to a nascent liberal pluralistic state system and politics—despite a shared empirical starting point—an interest in subsystem groups. This result suggests that their analysis is animated by quite different understandings of contemporary Russian constitutional development and human political nature. Taken together, these articles suggest both the perspicacity and the liability of group approaches to political processes.

By focusing on groups rather than tendencies of articulation, the articles presented here run the risk of elevating an aggregate of individuals—be they bankers,

regional leaders, nationalists, Communists, Duma leaders, mobsters, or members of the Presidential Administration—to, as Griffiths cautioned, “a thing in itself, which possesses purposes and a will of its own and acts independently of the interaction among its constituent parts.” Western and Russian observers of the post-Soviet political economy must explore tendencies of articulation, seeking to determine precisely how they might be related to—or based in—certain formations in Russian society—such as Kuzes and Nelson’s sectoral remnants of the old USSR branch ministry system, Brovkin’s local economic and regional criminal gentry, Blank’s miscreant security force chieftans, Glinski and Reddaway’s commercialized party-Komsomol elites, and Colloudon’s semi-pluralistic entrepreneurs and bankers.

The complexity of the analytic task at hand must be to take all of these realities—which, to some extent, may be said to coexist—and define different trajectories into the Russian future. The debate at present fundamentally revolves around the process of weighting and scaling various factors. Readers now confront a set of evaluations of Russian realities which differ in staging, trajectories, and outcome. In the end, the articles presented here illuminate points of ambiguity in competing images of the Russian present and future.