

of relations, Mankoff takes pains to collect evidence showing that the trend is larger than the personalities involved; it is tied to the vested Russian interest in opposing American global preeminence. Similarly, Mankoff traces a free fall in Russo-European relations, and insightfully concludes that “Russia’s approach to dealing with Europe remains caught between mutual dependence and mutual fear” (p. 182). Mankoff also finds contradictory trends in Sino-Russian relations. On one hand, there is a fairly natural economic congruence with China. Russia is a major energy exporter and China is the world’s fastest growing energy importer. They also share interests in combating Islamic radicalism in Asia, and in preventing American global primacy. This has resulted in Russia’s relatively stronger relationship with China than with either the United States or the European Union. However, China’s emergence as new superpower may potentially challenge Russia’s goal of reclaiming its place as a pole unto itself within a multipolar world. Moreover, China represents a potential threat along Russia’s relatively vulnerable southern flank. Mankoff’s sixth chapter traces Russia’s return to the offensive in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Once an exclusive Soviet buffer zone, the CIS is now a region where Russia has been challenged for influence by the United States, and, to a lesser extent China and the European Union. In the initial period after September 11, 2001, Russia accepted a limited U.S. presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, but since 2003 and the creation of the Ivanov Doctrine, Russia has grown increasingly intolerant of Western influence in its Near Abroad.

By the concluding chapter, Mankoff has persuasively established his thesis: Russia’s pursuit of power status in a multipolar world preceded Putin’s rise to power and is deeper than his personal ambitions. From this perspective, the Russian invasion of Georgia was not a shift in policy, but the culmination of a trend evident in the Yeltsin years. While Mankoff says too little about how the West can best handle Russia’s pursuit of great-power status, ultimately he suggests that the West needs “to reach out to Moscow, seeking a model of integration that simultaneously respects Russia’s stature and does not require the Western powers to sacrifice their own values” (p. 307).

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Casula, Philipp and Jeronim Perovic, eds. *Identities and Politics during the Putin Presidency: The Foundations of Russia’s Stability*. Stuttgart: *Ibidem* Verlag, 2009. 392 pp. ISBN 3-8382-0015-2.

Most of this fascinating book emerged from papers delivered at a workshop conducted at the University of Basel in September 2008 that explored the reconfiguring of a Russian national identity in the past decade. Its principal merit consists of the fact that, unlike almost all similar studies, the great majority of its nineteen chapters are not content to describe the surface content of Russian state ideology. Rather, the focus falls primarily on deconstructing regime discourse on state and nation, using Ernesto Laclau’s Discourse Theory to do the job. Thus, much new ground is broken here, accompanied by inconsistencies, if not outright disagreements, among the twenty authors involved that include questions of theory, interpretation, and fact. These differences in many respects represent signs of intellectual vitality.

Discourse Theory, at its core, effects a synthesis of elements taken from Gramscian political theory (hegemony), Saussurian linguistics (syntagmatic and paradigmatic forms of semantic association and difference), and Lacanian psychoanalysis (dislocation). It argues that modern politics can be grasped as a continuous battle over the means available to make meaning in public politics. This battle is punctuated by temporary triumphs and truces yielding the ideational hegemony of a given discourse establishing the semantic content of “the people,” the master signifier, around which all other claims are either connected as equivalences or consigned to the category of (constitutive) other, the horizon that bounds and defines the discourse itself. Events in the world, in conjunction

with the pulling and hauling of various demands within the chain of equivalences claiming participation of “the people,” produce dislocations, periods when the hitherto existing hegemony has lost its matter-of-fact obviousness and no longer commands a consensus in political society. These periods are characterized discursively as a Babel in which numerous discourses contend for hegemonic status. The contributors to this volume regard the final years of the USSR and the first decade of the Russian nation state as just such a period. The presidency of Vladimir Putin, then, can be understood as the victory of a new hegemonic project that has synthesized various elements present within the separate discourses on state and nation that had vied to install their respective definitions of things during the 1990s.

There is a contextual problem here, however, and it may account for some of the differences evident among these essays. Laclau’s concept of hegemony centers on “the people”, that discursive object that ties together all the elements in the dominant discourse and thus authorizes state actions in a manner not unlike, say, “God’s will” authorized the crusades. Claims against the reigning notion of “the people” are thus rendered heretical, and political life settles into more or less predictable patterns known as “stability” or “normal politics.” The problem for applying Discourse Theory to the contemporary Russian case is that the regime’s hegemonic project leaves no room for “the people.” Rather, its master signifiers are statist: “sovereign democracy,” “a strong Russia,” and so forth. It thus has the look of the artificial rather than the organic about it, a look that leads some contributors to argue that the regime’s stability has more to do with silencing opposing voices than with winning consent for their constructs. Although a matter of interpretation—and most interpretations, here, run in the direction of regarding the regime’s hegemonic project as successful—all of the contributions depict that project as concerned exclusively with Russia’s political elites. That is, neither in the official texts nor in the analyses presented here, do “the people” play a role. This aspect of Russia’s peculiar language of state and nation remains unexplored in this volume.

Within the confines of that limitation, however, there are many brilliant pieces in this collection. Because they are too numerous to identify in full, I shall comment on three that I found particularly rewarding. That by Viatcheslav Morozov on the regime’s hegemonic signifier, “sovereign democracy,” is especially appreciative of the ways in which this protean discourse responds to and is in turn shaped by internal dislocations conditioned by events in the world. His analysis of how it breathes in parts of the other—say, by deploying concepts of civic nationhood in response to Western global hegemony—while it exhales parts of the self—for instance, “anti-national oligarchs”—is a masterful exercise in explaining the inconsistent and contradictory ways in which the boundaries of national identity can be drawn and redrawn from one moment to the next. Similarly, Zachary Bowden’s innovative chapter on radical youth politics develops Discourse Theory itself by focusing on the process by which demands comprising a chain of equivalences—the stuff of hegemony—are actually linked together. Drawing on A. J. Greimas’s structural semantics, he shows how certain unarticulated signifiers, logically implied by others and thus “present” in a given articulation, do the work of welding the links together. These findings are as counterintuitive as they are compelling. Finally, Andrey Makarychev’s piece on contemporary portrayals of the nation in film and literature demonstrates how these media can subvert the regime’s hegemonic project even while—again, counterintuitively—they are necessary to it. Like Morozov, the vector in his analysis points away from the establishment of state dogma, as was the case in the USSR, and toward a more stable (and simultaneously vulnerable) hegemonic formation.

The editors of this volume criticize Western scholarship on Russia in the 1990s for transposing culture-bound concepts such as democracy and civil society onto a place in which something else entirely was transpiring. This dislocation, to take a page from their book, in the hegemonic discourse of Western scholarship would open the way for fresh approaches such as those represented in this volume.

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