

supports his central thesis by examining seminal events that occurred during Putin's presidency and, overall, he succeeds in demonstrating Putin's negative impact on Russia by exposing the contradictions of his actions.

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Identities and Politics during the Putin Presidency: The Foundations of Russia's Stability by Philipp Casula and Jeronim Perovic (eds). Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2009. 392pp., £35.00, ISBN 978 3 8382 0015 6

The relative stability of Russian politics over the last decade was a defining feature of Vladimir Putin's presidency and, indeed, goes a long way to explaining the former president's persistently high popularity rates. After the chaos and dislocation (to borrow a term used extensively in this book) of the Yeltsin years, the Putin project was all about establishing a strong Russian state and re-establishing a strong power vertical in response to the leaching away of power from the centre to regional governors and the infamous oligarchs.

Unlike many other books appraising the Putin presidency, this edited collection, which brings together papers presented at a workshop in September 2008, does so mainly from an explicitly post-structuralist standpoint, relying heavily (though not exclusively) on discourse theoretical approaches. The danger of creating an edited book based on workshop or conference contributions that utilise broadly similar analytical frameworks is that there can be a good deal of theoretical duplication and repetition, and this is the case here with the majority of chapters particularly heavily indebted to the works of Laclau and Mouffe. The editors might have thought about producing slightly more detailed introductory theoretical chapters than those that exist here, with the subsequent chapters informed by – but not, as in some cases, subordinate to – the theory.

That said, this collection does add to our understanding of the processes taking place during Putin's two terms as president. The chapters relating to the concept of sovereign democracy are particularly useful, helping to provide a clearer understanding of this peculiarly Russian concept, which was developed during Putin's second term as a means of defining the Russian polity and countering Western criticism of Russia's

'managed democracy'. The tensions between sovereign democracy and modernisation (the new mantra of Russia's ruling elite) are clear. Victoria Hudson sees sovereign democracy as depicting Russia at a fork in its developmental road, one route leading to modernisation and social development, the other a 'murky path to chauvinistic stagnation' (p. 185, p. 193). Viatcheslav Morozov argues that sovereign democracy can be seen both as an ideology of modernisation, in as much as it aims to establish Russia as a sovereign subject in Westphalian terms, and as a restoration project based on notions of Soviet modernity (p. 223).

Despite the above reservation, the authors should be congratulated for producing a volume that successfully challenges much of the outdated Western thinking on the development of post-Soviet Russian politics.

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Executive Power of the European Union: Law, Practices, and the Living Constitution by Deirdre Curtin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 345pp., £24.99, ISBN 978 0 19 926409 4

In this book Deirdre Curtin sets out to map the executive power of the EU with its checks and balances as well as to consider the positioning of the findings within a wider constitutional perspective. As anyone who is doing research on the EU can verify, the EU legal and political system is in constant flux, and frequent institutional changes mean that we continually need to reassess the balance of power between the institutions and other actors involved. *Executive Power of the European Union: Law, Practices, and the Living Constitution* places great emphasis on development over time, and the author effectively uses a metaphor from geology – the 'Metaphor of "Sedimentation"' (p. 8) – to illustrate how not only major reforms but also the day-to-day functioning of the system play a part in shaping the political order of the EU.

In contrast to many other studies of EU executive power, this book takes a holistic approach; rather than providing an in-depth analysis of a particular institution, Curtin analyses the political and administrative branches of the Council and the Commission as well as non-majoritarian agencies. In the two chapters preceding the conclusion, she also conceptualises 'transparency' and 'accountability' and explores how these