

**BOOK REVIEW**

Social Sciences, Contemporary Russia, and Other

**Russian Politics: A Very Short Introduction by Brian D. Taylor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 152 pp. \$12.99. ISBN 978-0-19-751602-7****Jeremy Morris**Aarhus University  
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Brian D. Taylor has done an excellent job at condensing for a nonspecialist reader the state-of-the-art knowledge on Russian politics. At the same time he manages to contextualize current tendencies with Russia's convoluted history and place in the world, all the while writing engagingly, without dumbing anything down, and giving ample coverage to the diversity of approaches and positions one finds in scholarly study of the country. The book is divided into six chapters with more than 118 pages of text, as well as a short preface that poses the question of whether in the future Russians will be governed as subjects or citizens. The chapters are thematic and of great use to the general reader (and not only the general one); they put "politics"-as-events-and-governments into conversation with geography (chapter one); great power status and rivalry (chapter two); economic backwardness and development (chapter three); experiments with democratization (chapter four); the primacy of the state (chapter five); and the status of leaders and elites (chapter six). The references and reading list at the end of the book similarly do not disappoint. This is a well written book, and its general audience is in capable hands.

From the outset Taylor refuses to pander to prejudice, stereotype, and even accepted scholarly wisdoms. Why could Russia not have become a decentralized and democratic federal system in the 1990s? There are good reasons to think that with the challenges of the future, including climate change, this must be the only viable future for the Russian state. In this opening chapter, Taylor covers topics like Siberian colonization, relative isolation from global flows of ideas, low population density, geographic skewness (too many people living in cold places—we learn that the nine coldest large cities in the world are all in Russia), and the contradictory yet also familiar trajectory of historical imperialism.

In the following two chapters, Taylor argues that there are few measures by which one could really view Russia today as a great power, let alone by any yardstick one would measure her predecessors. Is being the largest country with a large military a genuine measure of "greatness"? The shift to revanchism and confrontation in the 2000s was not inevitable, Taylor argues. Here he embarks on some sober assessment of the break in continuity that Putin provides with predecessors, and the road he could have taken. At the same time, the diminution in Russian capacities means that Taylor sees no real threat of Cold War 2.0. He reminds that the primary damage of the Ukraine war beyond the theater of operations is to Russia's future economic and development prospects. On the Soviet model, Taylor is good at stepping back and looking at the period in perspective—the long shadow of collectivization and abortive command from the center. Economically, at least, the Soviet experiment was seventy wasted years and transition resulted in high inequality and oil dependence, conditions that mean the country will find it hard to wean itself off a closed and authoritarian political system.

For Taylor, what doomed the 1990s democratic experiment was the revenge of an abiding history of state-primacy in Russia which, in turn, set the country onto the path towards becoming a personalist authoritarian regime. Taylor is generous in the space he gives to others' ideas—we get call outs to



terms like “weak strongman,” “spin dictator,” “informational autocracy,” and “patronal politics.” A key point here is the management of information to give the impression of there being no alternative to the status quo. Putin’s popularity was (is?) real, but meant different things to different people, and Russia is still a country in political and social transition.

Overall, then, Taylor achieves a rare feat: a balanced, scholarly, and extremely wideranging introduction to what the lay reader needs to know about Russian politics in approximately one to two hours of reading. Toward the end, he discusses the problems of personalist autocracies’ longevity. He supports the view of observers like Tatyana Stanovaya, who argues that popular legitimacy is no longer an issue for the regime, yet Taylor adds that no ruler is forever, and he strikes a more optimistic note. Some questions remain less well explored, as one would expect in a short treatment. For example, is repression more important than informational control in the twenty-first century autocracy? Can a state-centered society recover more quickly from episodes of autocracy or do these characteristics support each other? The sensitive reader will understand that by carefully relating Putin’s Russia to existing models of autocracies, Taylor not only undercuts views of Russia’s exceptionalism, but provides clues to future pathways away from the morbid symptoms it currently exhibits.