

Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin

By William Zimmerman

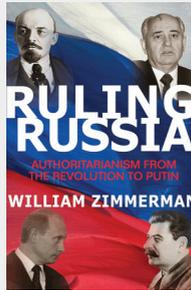
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, 344 pages, \$27,88, ISBN: 9780691161488.

Reviewed by Javadbay Khalilzada, Istanbul Şehir University

In his book, *Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin*, William Zimmerman illustrates how the Russian political system unfolded in roughly a century from the Bolshevik Revolution to the beginning of Putin's third term of the presidency, 2012. The main argument that the author demonstrates is how the Russian political system continues to exist with its constant authoritarian spirit.

"Is Russia, was it, or will it be a normal country" (p. 1) is the central question of the book. The term "normal" was used by Mikhail Gorbachev (p. 171) and Boris Yeltsin (p. 196), referring to a "democratic" Western style country. However, as the author emphasizes (pp. 174; 202), both Gorbachev and Yeltsin tried to consolidate their power with a new approach, rather than making Russia a "normal" country.

To begin with in the first chapter, the writer illustrates that after the revolution, Russia had the chance to build a democratic country. The most open elections prior to the Gorbachev era, were held immediately after the Bolshevik seizure of power, Socialist Peasantry got a majority of votes and Bolsheviks finished second. However, the Bolsheviks decision to withdraw from World War I and the Brest-Litovsk Treaty let the Bolsheviks to receive the support of the majority and stay in power. But



the decision was not approved easily, even in the Central Committee and disagreements between Committee members and trade unions leaders produced a weakened Central Committee. One of the turning points towards authoritarianism was the tenth party congress, which resulted in eliminating ordinary

workers as part of the selectorate in the Central Committee. Moreover, with subsequent actions, the Communist Party rapidly transformed into a large administrative apparatus, and the leadership was capable of enforcing its policy preferences without debating them in the Central Committee. Developments in 1920 and 1921 transformed the Party as an organization into what was basically the entity that persisted until *glasnost*.

Until chapter five, the author, discusses the betrayal of revolutionary ideas and mobilization of all power into the hands of the party, particularly the victory of Joseph Stalin over his rivals. In the beginning of the 1920s, trade unions were deprived of the rights to defend workers against management's caprices, which they had under capitalism. Throughout the Soviet history they were an instrument of the state. Another significant step was "the liquidation of the *kulak* as a class" (p. 53): it followed massive and rapid collectivization, and for the urban worker it meant the Five-Year Plan that followed several times in the Soviet history. In art, science and all related

areas with the policy of the “Cultural Revolution,” the party diffused into all areas and dictated its policies on raising Soviet citizens.

Parallel to the increasing authoritarianism of the party, Stalin was the supreme leader of the USSR, and the author calls this term as the totalitarian period. As the author states, in chapters three and four, from the mid-1930s towards the beginning of World War II, no one’s life was secure. The Stalinist terror reached its peak in 1937 (p. 95). By accusing people of being in cooperation with the capitalist states, state officials, minorities and even old Bolsheviks were suppressed, banished and executed. During the Stalin period, state terror was the linchpin of the Soviet mobilization system.

After the end of WWII, new economic plans were launched to develop the economy following the destruction of the war. The Stalinist terror was also slated. In the beginning of the 1950s the “Doctors’ Plot” was assumed as a beginning of a new stage of purges which targeted the inner circle of Stalin: however, with the death of Stalin it stopped. The author defines the period from Nikita Khrushchev to Gorbachev by “welfare authoritarianism” in chapter five. In this term there was a small selectorate and the Politburo turned in to a collective decision making body. Although both Khrushchev and Brezhnev were indisputable leaders, neither of them were both chairman of the Council of Ministers and Party head, which demonstrate that there was oligarchic constraint (p. 143). Another significance of this period is that game of thrones did not result in terror or execution of defeated rivals, and Soviet society became increasingly complex, largely urban and industrial.

The following four chapters are dedicated to the “uncertainty” and victory of the authori-

tarian Putin regime. Russian politics entered new turmoil with the Gorbachev era. Zimmerman argues that although Gorbachev intended to change USSR to a “normal country” by applying several reforms (p. 174), indeed, he tried to change the system and to enhance his power position. But things went out of his control. By enlarging the selectorate class, he intended to empower his presidency, but suppressed nations used it to get their independence, and member states agreed on dissolution of the USSR. Yeltsin used *glasnost* to come to power and was a president of Russia. In the beginning he also announced his intention to turn Russia in to a “normal country” (p. 196). But when he realized that separation of power was weakening his presidency, he also turned to follow his predecessors. According to Zimmerman, in the 1993 parliamentary elections Yeltsin outmuscled the Congress and sought to institutionalize a super-presidential constitution (p. 202). Although the 1996 presidential election was most competitive and democratic, by using state budget and oligarchs’ support, Yeltsin succeeded in securing the presidency.

According to the author, the turning point for Russia’s political life from competitive democracy toward authoritarianism was the 2004 election. Prior to his presidency Vladimir Putin was appointed to the post of prime-minister and Yeltsin declared Putin his successor. His success against the Chechenian War took him to victory in the 2000 election. According to Zimmerman, this election was competitive but less transparent compared to the 1996 elections. Furthermore, the 2004 elections were less transparent than 2000 – numerous frauds leaked out. By adjusting several legislative regulations, Putin subordinated power under his presidency. Putin also used irregular ways to neutralize his rivals, by

repressing and sent them to jail, and nationalizing their property. He was constantly criticized by democratic institutions, however, by using oil price rises in his favor Putin stayed in power over and over. For the third term, 2008-2012, Putin was replaced with Medvedev, Putin became Prime Minister and Medvedev president and in 2011 Medvedev announced that Putin will run for presidency in 2012. The switch was assessed as the return of full-authoritarianism to Russia. Although in 2011 and 2012 there were several protests against Putin, the 2012 election was less open than its antecedent and the author assesses it as not “an election type” (p. 286). The author observed in detail the president and parliament elections in 2000 and concludes that with Putin’s presidency, Russia strayed from Schumpeterian democracy and readjusted authoritarianism.

Apparently Russia will not be a “normal” country, at least in the near future. In a period of a century Russia twice was close to building a “normal” country but it failed. Although the author largely explains how power games were held in Russia, it is inadequate to explain what the reason for it maybe, or whether Russia inherited this “authoritarian spirit” from the Tsarist Empire. The author did not mention the Tsarist Empire, however, the Bolshevik Russia recaptured all imperial colonies and established the Soviet Union. Another point is the use of highly academic language that makes the book difficult for non-native speakers. In general, the book presents an overview of the Soviet and Russian politics. Considering pros and cons of the book, it is informative about the Soviet and Russian politics for general readers and beginners of Russian studies.

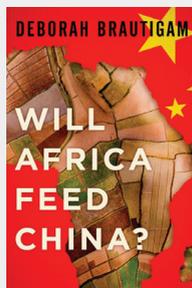
Will Africa Feed China?

By Deborah Brautigam

New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, xvii + 222 pages, \$ 27.95, ISBN: 9780199396856.

Reviewed by Enock Ndawana, University of Zimbabwe

The recent rise in global food prices, China’s rise and its aggressive overseas agricultural investment policies resulted in the Western media labelling it the leading “land grabber” in Africa and the world. It is the lack of investigative reporting about China’s role in foreign agricultural investment that culminated in the propagation of several myths by the media, civil society, governments and even academia. The gap between myths and realities motivated Deborah Brautigam, the author of *Will Africa Feed China?* to purposefully find out the



factual story behind the Western panic of China’s fast land acquisition in Africa. Brautigam unquestionably proves that she is one of the world’s prominent scholars on China-Africa relations by investigating the myths and realities behind the media headlines following her two earlier publications. She is the author of *Chinese Aid and African Development* and *The Dragon’s Gift: the Real Story of China in Africa*, all demonstrating her deep-rooted interest concerning “what the Chinese are doing in rural Africa” (p. 7).