Michael Urban’s new book provides a rich meal for the reader. His ideas are arranged loosely in what could be described as courses with appetizers (theory), entrees (analysis of interview data he collected along four axes), and dessert (discussion of the events of 1991 as a revolution). The book could almost be called *Kinship of Power*. “I converse only with my own people,” says one respondent (62). Teams of like-minded individuals form the backbone of the book, both as architects and as opponents of the changes associated with the periods from 1985 to the present.

In a careful discourse analysis Urban closely examines the political views of five groups of elite politicians on key topics: community, morality and law, competence and approval, plus the specific transitions in politics associated with the revolution of 1991. He asks why it is that Russian political elites have a weak sense of community and public approval and why they have a varied sense of competence and professionalism, on the one hand, and morality and law, on the other.

Urban does not undertake to study the whole of Russian culture but rather the specific verbal culture of the political elite. As he himself admits, the book will be a bit challenging for those who are not theoretically inclined because it is itself deeply embedded in a series of terms that are interconnected and each of which unlocks others. Without going into all of them here, the most important is certainly the term *discourse* itself, which Urban defines cogently as “a set of deep categories authorizing and governing communication” (1).

Discursive constructions are at the heart of Urban’s method. In May 2005 and June 2006 he and two Russian colleagues conducted 34 interviews with leading members of the political elite in five time periods: under Mikhail Gorbachev, in the first and second parts of Boris El’tsin’s presidency (1991–1993 and 1993–1999), in the opposition group Iabloko, and under Vladimir Putin. Urban then analyzed those interviews to determine the assumptions made by these individuals vis-à-vis the political realm.

His principal findings support those of a number of scholars working on what might be called the personal nature of Russian politics (Alena Ledeneva, Olga Kryshtanovskaya, Olga Shevchenko, Eugene Huskey, Peter Solomon, and Urban himself) where state practices are based, not in institutions, laws, and electoral transparency, but rather in networks, cohorts, and circles, and derive their form from informal rather than formal practices. In the end readers of this book will not be too surprised to learn that morality trumps law in the consciousness of these actors, and personal relations trump commitment to the public, which, as Urban shows, is almost entirely tragically missing from politicians’ narratives of past, present, and future.

On the theoretical level Urban has tried to create an alternative way of understanding state-society relations in Russia by positing that the Weberian ideal type (which he terms *Civil Society I*) does not fit Russian reality well. Instead he argues that Russia belongs to a model of *Civil Society II* characterized by informal networks; embodied social (rather than economic) relations; strong ties among the actors; and a weak, diffuse sense of purpose; weak rule of law; and personal appropriation of public offices. This broad theoretical conclusion is not entirely
new, as I say, but it is crucial that he makes a broad theoretical defense as to why scholars should stop comparing Russian realities to Weberian ideals for western Europe. Catherine the Great may have insisted that Russia is a European state, but that does not make it so in reality.

The main challenge with Urban's book is that he has not fully addressed the problem of politics as actual practice, beyond discourse. Without presenting at least some institutional or other political data, Urban cannot show the full ramifications of his own findings. Urban does talk about the problem of collective actors (“teams” in their own terms) who have a narrow sense of identity, limited only to a few in their immediate circle. And he quotes one respondent who talks about the deep insecurity that actors in this system feel, fearing that, should other groups arise, their group may be unceremoniously dumped. It would have been useful, however, for Urban to consider the zero-sum nature of Russian politics: the fact that the actual political structures (and not just the discourse) are set up in such a way that only one “insider” group is in power. Once that group is overthrown, they are not allowed to linger on the edges of power; they will not be able to find another political game in town. (This, of course, was why Leonid Brezhnev’s supporters were unwilling to see a new leader come to power even when he was old and almost completely senile.) Similarly, by not talking about actual political parties (with the exception of Iabloko), Urban does not extend his analysis quite as far as he could have. Since, as he shows so compellingly, relations among political elites are built on personal rather than ideational ties, the reader can easily see why it becomes difficult for them to foster the extensive social and political cooperation necessary for creating social movements. A few examples from the history of Iabloko, Soiuz pravykh sil (SPS, Union of Right Forces), and other political parties might have rounded out Urban's argument, showing the tendency of those parties to descend into personal bickering and the difficulties they have in building constituencies based on a common commitment to particular solutions to Russia’s problems.

The book is also not entirely satisfactory on the question of causality. Of course, there are many chickens and eggs in these matters, so it may not be possible to develop a definitive solution. Nonetheless, a couple of Urban's assertions seem worth pondering. At several points he suggests that the weakness of a system of law is the root cause of the tendency of elites to form personalized, informal practices. Reading his discourse analysis, I found myself wondering if the converse might not also be true. Might not the close relations of top elites be causal in undermining efforts to create a more transparent, egalitarian system of law because the latter could produce a direct threat to their privileges? Another question of causality arises with respect to the elites’ disparaging views of “the people” and whether those elite views increase popular alienation. Might not the system work the other way? In other words, existing popular alienation may also play a role in inclining political elites to see the masses as either saintly or inert.

Reading this book was a bit like playing Sudoku. Of the 34 respondents I found that I could identify probably two-thirds. The two women were quite easy because Urban made no effort to hide their identities. For several men, he included their first names in the quotes, making it easy to identify them. In other cases he revealed particular jobs held or geographical identifiers. In the end it was good to have some idea who the respondents probably were because they began to develop a signature tone in my reading. A4 (one of the Gorbachev cohort), for example, tended to view everyone as scoundrels, traitors, and lawless
hotheads. B4, by contrast, offered philosophical comments about the nature of politics, humanism, and the need for professional politicians to display “developed, cultured thinking” (note on 131).

A final challenge of Urban’s analysis lies in his sampling method. The Gorbachev cohort is too disparate to allow much generalization (except for Urban’s important point that they tended to be wedded to the rules of the game), so they are not so key here. But the two El’tsin cohorts (B and C) whom Urban interviewed were principally economists chosen by El’tsin and Egor Gaidar to introduce the new reforms (with a few philosophers and historians thrown in for good measure). Urban finds that they viewed themselves principally as professionals who happened to be serving in politics (rather than professional politicians). This is definitely an interesting question. Still, given that this is the sample he chose, can he legitimately attribute this quality to this group? Were all of El’tsin’s advisers professionals from outside politics, I found myself wondering? Were there no apparatchiks (professional bureaucrats) at all in this group?

The Iabloko group (D) of respondents had a different profile but ultimately a similar sampling problem. Urban found that they consistently discussed politics in a language of morality (rather than presumably law or electoral politics) and even moral absolutism. Yet I found myself wondering whether this is not also part of their self-definition, their self-presentation. In other words, to a certain extent they have made a conscious ideological choice to be the party of morality, the opposition that consistently raises human rights and other moral issues. Nonetheless, I found myself intrigued by following some of Urban’s respondents to ask whether it is possible that in Russia in the early twenty-first century the discourse of morality serves as a weapon of the weak, a language and a stance to be adopted when the speaker feels no urgency to find a solution to a problem. Do politicians adopt this language in situations where they cannot effect any changes but prefer to stand on the sidelines and critique the political and social failings of the top leadership? Does this in turn result from the winner-take-all aspect of Russian politics (which, as I mentioned, Urban does not discuss)?

Not surprisingly, the Putin cohort comes across as the most cynical in the book (Urban devotes a whole section of his morality chapter to them in that context), but also the most ideological. In an interview, Urban noted that they were also the most difficult to persuade to be interviewed. Clearly it was easiest for them to hide behind notions of “history,” sobornost’, or a paternal state, rather than any yardsticks of morality or particular goals to be attained.

Ultimately, Urban has provided us with indeed the rich meal that he promised. There are other questions one could ask of the same data set (ones that I found myself missing in Urban’s analysis): the interviewees’ (in)tolerance for difference (given their commitment to communal approval within their own group); their sense of collective responsibility (krugovaia poruka), which is alluded to but not fully developed; their lack of interest in transparency in politics (in one story a respondent says “of course I know the way,” alluding to the dacha where political discussions were to be held as if it did not bother him in the least that this was a private dacha that only a few insiders could find); and generation (How do the respondents’ ages affect their findings? How were they influenced by various formative events in the period under study and especially just prior?).

I would have been particularly curious to hear more about the issue of performance. To what extent were the members of various teams performing rituals they might or might not believe in? Were they conscious of the degree of ideological conformity?

At the end of the day, this is certainly a work that will give many readers food for further thought, regardless of whatever criticisms one may have. Specialists will enjoy grappling with the nuances of the book, while general readers will be able to develop an appreciation of the complexity of Russian politics today.

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