

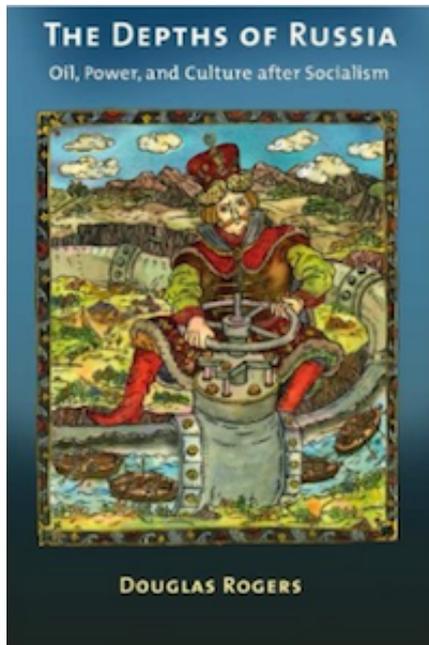


TRANSITIONS ONLINE: **Can Russia Be Remade From Below?**

by **Andre Haertel**

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Douglas Rogers' book on the role of oil as a source for state-building in the Perm region suggests more diverse trajectories for Russian political development than commonly assumed.



The Depths of Russia: Oil, Power, and Culture after Socialism by Douglas Rogers, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2015, 370 pages.

It is not easy these days to find informative and sober works on Russia. The wars in Ukraine and Syria, Moscow's alleged meddling in Western elections, and, above all, its obvious and worldwide propaganda effort have created an atmosphere of hypocrisy and polarization, where anything written on Russia sells well, and anything portraying it as a renewed “evil empire” and a source of a new cold (or hot) war sells even better.

In general, many of the books trying to explain contemporary Russia are awkwardly similar in their approaches: they are obsessed with the personality of Vladimir Putin; they often disregard regional developments in the belief of a super-centralized state structure; and they grossly underestimate to what degree Russia and its often uniquely perceived struggles are part of the same globalized realities that Western political systems and economies have to cope with.

Douglas Rogers' book on the role of oil as a source for both state-building and a re-invention of culture in the Perm region is an innovative and enriching – if at times lengthy and overly detailed – exception to this trend. Not only does the name “Putin” very rarely appear, the author engages in a very comprehensive account on how regional corporate and state actors managed to find a way out of the political chaos and economic misery of the 1990s – and largely free from Moscow's meddling. While this regional variant of post-Soviet state-building is compelling enough for, say, those interested in political transition and democratization, the very “Perm-style” (*po-permskii*) way of doing things described here also helps to at least challenge some of the popular myths created more recently in the West about Russian political development.

The book becomes most refreshing when Rogers puts his observations into the wider context of the “transformation of (global) capitalism in its neo-liberal phase,” as the author puts it. Not only in the West, he argues, has the role of corporations and states – he calls both “Leviathans” – changed. The global trend beginning in the early 1990s toward privatization and the increased power of corporations has resulted in, on the one hand, states and corporations becoming more interpenetrated (especially in terms of overlapping interests and personal connections) and dependent on each other. On the other, there is mounting pressure on corporations to take over social responsibilities – as a way to legitimize their new status and fend off the mostly leftist critiques. In Russia, contrary to much public wisdom, big business remained a political actor especially on the regional level even after the 2003 Yukos affair and Putin's subordination of oligarchs as an omnipotent class. Moreover, the fact that in the Russian context privatization and the rise of corporate actors coincided with post-Soviet state-building resulted in an extraordinarily close, if not outright blurred, relationship with state agencies.

Lost Chances

Nevertheless, the Russia of the 1990s differed from that of the 2000s in its fluid, experimental, and, as Rogers puts it, “everyday life”-oriented nature. Lacking any stability, Russian society back then thought in terms of survival rather than long-term visions. But that also meant that another direction or model for the country was still imaginable at the time, and here

the term “civil society” loomed large. Especially in Perm, known for its comparative openness, the “third sector,” supported by the West and a trend toward overall decentralization in the country, considerably developed until the late 90s. Yet, it is here where the book becomes a bit disappointing as the failure of a more bottom-up- and society-oriented, political and economic model is almost exclusively explained by civil society’s comparative weakness in the post-Soviet space (the author calls it “a world of projects”) or even by the alleged misguided belief of social scientists in its “organizational reality” and existence as such. Rather, it seems to me that the described processes of cooptation and hijacking of civil initiatives by state actors in Perm point to the region-wide and ongoing efforts of authoritarian elites to prevent the third sector – an often more vivid threat than thought – from being perceived as an organizational reality by the rest of society.



Perm mural depicting Putin's tears as oil. Image via cea plus/Flickr Commons

On the surface, the rise of Vladimir Putin, the subordination of the Russian oligarchs, and a more centralized state structure (*vertikal vlasti*) coalesced with the stabilization of Perm's political and economic model from the mid-2000s onwards. However, this is also the point where things become interesting, since Perm in many ways did not conform in its boom years to what many observers see as a specific “Putin model” of stabilizing Russia after the turbulent 1990s. The centrality of Lukoil-Perm – a daughter company of Russia’s giant vertically integrated oil producer Lukoil – to all economic and political processes in the region cannot be understood without taking a look back. Especially in energy-rich regions – such as in Perm, known at one point as the Soviet Union’s “Second Baku” – a regional approach was strengthened by the instability and pervasive distrust of the 1990s, and together with Moscow’s almost non-existent central authority, led to a new imagination of regional existence and belonging. This strong regional legacy allowed for the creation of a specific “state-corporate field” governing the region of Perm – a system in which corporate and state interests not only blurred, but where Lukoil-Perm as a corporate actor was essential in rebuilding regional state agencies (and not the other way around).

Here, the book reaches its peak in challenging conventional wisdom about Russia's development under Putin, and especially the myth that the oil boom of the early 2000s resulted in a general cultural and political transformation most easily characterized by the catchwords of (Russian) nationalism, centralization, censorship, and repression. Turning to the domain of culture in the final part, Rogers manages to show how both Lukoil-Perm and regional state agencies – via publicly sanctioned, corporate social responsibility projects – successfully used the “cultural front” to transform regional subjects such as communities and citizens, and establish new signifiers of meaning. Thereby, regional corporate and state actors perpetuated the regional power logic granting them much autonomy despite Moscow's centralization efforts. At least for a time, Lukoil-Perm's cultural managers succeeded, with their tight logical coupling of oil and culture, in the region-wide mobilization of cities, villages, and museums in a cultural reinvention of the region, aiming as well at the “formation of new post-Soviet subjects” as “independent and civic minded.” In the south of Perm those projects were especially geared toward national minorities such as Tatars and Bashkirs, whose local identities were deliberately supported. Even if the corporate interest in gaining legitimacy for a new, capitalist order of things and the political quest for (regional) control stood behind all those efforts, the results provide a stark contrast to most accounts of Russia's development under Putin.

Oil-Fueled Culture

It would be misleading here not to mention that the “Perm model” was indeed based on the oil boom of the early 2000s and the constant stream of cash flooding into Perm's public budgets and enabling Lukoil-Perm to finance its grandiose cultural project movement. Other regions, especially in Russia's west and south, did not have those luxuries and might therefore have gone other, more conservative ways of state building. Much has also been made of the oil price plummeting from the global financial crisis onward – obviously a challenge to Russia's commodity-based, economic resurgence and the legitimacy of its regime, but even more so to the stability and future of a region dominated by corporate energy interests.

In Perm, the gradual separation of corporate and regional political interests – the decline of the “state-corporate field” – coincided with the global financial crisis and the fall of the oil price. More significant, though, is that even in this situation, the region's governor, Oleg Chirkunov, did not lose his belief in an alternative way for Perm, a way that again would see culture as a key component. Having earlier predicted the receding significance of oil for his region, Chirkunov now aimed to reinvent Perm and use the creative potential of culture to “make a new kind of people” and replace “the dreams of ever-expanding oil wealth [...] by the endless potential of human creativity.” Although the governor's grand plans for making Perm a European Capital of Culture in 2016 – a “Bilbao on the Kama” – were never realized, this last phase covered by Rogers' book tells us a lot. First, it uncovers the fundamental struggle of many Russian regions to replace the first working post-Soviet models, made defunct now both by the global financial crisis and their own, anti-innovative, and mono-structural character. Second, Rogers' research, however, also demonstrates that the response of especially regional elites to that crisis was not homogeneous and that ideas of de-centralization, liberalization, and individual empowerment existed (and might still exist) alongside the dominant authoritarian trend.

Searching for Sources of Legitimacy

Can Russia be remade from its regions? If we reformulate the question somewhat, we might arrive at an unsettling general message of Roger's book, one the author strangely seems not to be much bothered with: Can there be a Russia remade from below? Reflecting on Perm, notwithstanding its distinctive model and approaches portrayed by Rogers, we nevertheless find traits very similar to the common wisdom about Putin's Russia: the top-down approach of political and economic elites toward governance, the marginalization of independent initiatives and opposition, and even a perspective on culture as something invented from above, much like in Soviet times. The exclusion of wider parts of society from any model of governance is the feature all regional and central approaches to Russian state building under Putin have in common. Perm's development demonstrates that – in contrast to some of its neighbors, where civil society inclusion has already made a leap forward in the meantime – Russia could afford this exclusion because of precisely one factor: energy commodities. From this perspective, the current crisis and skeptical forecasts regarding commodity prices might be a healthy shock for the system. For now the Russian regime has, temporarily, found an alternative source of legitimacy in its foreign adventures. In the long run, central and regional elites will hardly get around finding a new political and economic model for their country – a task traditionally posing the most fundamental of questions in Russia, such as regime and ultimately state survival.

Finally, let us return to one of Rogers' central assumptions: that Russian development is much less original than commonly assumed and that Russian political and economic processes are part of the same wider international and global trends as experienced by any other industrialized country. Indeed, the Russia of 2016 is, notwithstanding its lack of much economic and political diversity, maybe the most modern, capitalist, and internationally integrated Russian state in history. The troubles it plunged into during the worldwide financial and economic crisis are the best evidence for that. From that angle, the current political standoff between the West and Moscow looks like an anachronism, or in the best case an interlude, after which genuine rapprochement and structural cooperation should be possible. Among the most important pre-conditions for that is Western political elites' ability and willingness to take, as Rogers does, a much deeper and more long-term view on Russian development and to develop visions for U.S.- and/or EU-Russian relations based on the many ties and challenges that already connect them.

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