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Review: “Crisis: Russia and the West in the Time of Troubles” by Lilia Shevtsova and David J. Kramer.¹

The book – consisting of 18 articles – describes Russian foreign policy and the domestic response to Russia’s international engagement in recent years. This book comes at a timely moment as Russian political and public discourses revolve around the nexus of democracy and liberalization, as well as domestic community cohesion and sovereignty within Russian Federation.

Shevtsova and Kramer begin by posing an obvious but often neglected question: should Russia still pursue enemies either at home or abroad, whom should Russia trust, and where is Russia going?

Reviewers have the advantage of knowing the results of the Moscow mayoral elections in September; about the US. Government shutdown; and about the successes of Russian diplomacy in Syria. The authors repeatedly remind readers that there has “never in history been a task akin to the democratization of nuclear superpower with imperialistic ambitions” – a country that is “either preparing for war against an external enemy or pursuing enemies at home”(P.14). Nevertheless, developments since the book’s publication have shed new light on Russia relations with the West. One part of liberal society, former opponents of the current regime, spoke about the “reset of Putin’s policy,” his “new operating (enforcement) strategy“ (Nikolaiy Uskov) and “Putin’s triumph” (Gleb Pavlovsky). Kiril Pogov suggests that changes in Russian foreign policy are representations of the “logic and behavior of [a] regime faced with serious difficulties.”

Russia today is a fast-tracked version of the 90's. It faces increasingly tense relationships with the U.S. and other countries, as well as an internal crisis and an assumption that “without stability there is no democracy.” Russian policy is a shadowy playground, where diplomats play by their own rules. I would call modern Russian policy a “shadow” policy because very little information is available. We still do not understand the motives behind contemporary policy.

¹ Lilia Shevtsova and David J. Kramer (2013) *Crisis: Russia and the West in the Time of Troubles*, Carnegie Moscow Center, Moscow, 159 p.

In the coming years Russia will pursue an anti-democratic course, in particular after Olympic game in 2014 and World Cup in 2018. Domestic policy will experience ups and downs because of economic decline, growing unemployment, and decreasing social benefits such as motherhood capital. Foreign policy will be characterized by pragmatism and strongly depend on whether or not Russia is successful in establishing a Eurasian union, which will make Russia a stabilizing force in the region. Likely, Western nations will not support the Russian government in its political and economic modernization efforts. At the same time, we will not witness tougher and more outspoken criticism of the Kremlin by Western governments, because the geopolitical landscape will change drastically (the foundation of Eurasian Union, the emergence of Asian countries, the Russian economic and political shift toward Asia). EU and US criticism will have little impact on Russian domestic policy. As a result Western governments will reduce such criticisms.

Russia will not be able to lead a completely “normal” policy towards her foreign and domestic opponents until liberalization and democratization are complete. Cultural forces will bring about these changes. Democracy is about “being-together” and replacing dysfunctional and repressive politics. There are some doubts about the potential for democracy within Russia, as well as about the societal awakening it may inspire. A huge number of Russians still “cling to Putin”(P. 33) and are unable to consolidate in a collective opposition movement. Besides, “the mood in Moscow” is not “of crucial importance for Russia’s future” (P. 102). For years, Russian experts, including Natalia Zubarevitch, have spoken about regional differences within Russia. Indeed, Russia today is far from being a unified or homogenous state; rather it is an increasingly fractured archipelago of territories.

The next debatable point is all about the tasks and responsibilities of Western actors toward Russia (Challenging the Seven Myths, P.37-40). To be clear, Western governments likely will not be Heracles cleaning Russian horses’ houses. An analysis of Russian-German relations confirms this (Germany and Russia: The End of Ostpolitik, P.110-117).

The main failing of modern Russian policy abroad and at home is the reluctance to reform the country’s resource-oriented economic strategy. Given such unwillingness to reform, it is hard to share in the authors’ predictions of a liberal coup (The Agony, P. 150-156). The authors mention that Spain and South Africa moved “from liberalization to restoration and back again.” Why, then, should we have a “fatalistic view” of the Russian future? (P.18) Rather, it is better to search for a figure among the “system liberals” capable of

meeting the demands of Russian society. We do not have him/her yet, although finding one is definitely a task for the near future.

One of the important themes in the book is the difference between “politics making” in Western countries and in Russia. In Russia, politicians create circumstances from politics, while their colleagues in Europe and in USA create politics from circumstances. The best illustration of this is the “What the Magnitsky Act Means” (P. 118-124).

Crisis: Russia and the West in the Time of Troubles has the potential to become part of a wider discussion on Russian foreign and domestic politics. Against the widespread assumption that Russia-West relations - in particular Russia-EU relations - have been handled well, and in particular that Russian and Western governments work well together on security matters, this book shows enormous controversial challenges that are now taking place in this field.

The book’s audiences may range from students who wish to learn about modern transformations of Russian policy to foreign policy’ experts who are searching for high quality analysis on Russian international affairs. Undoubtedly the book will be of interest to a broad audience.