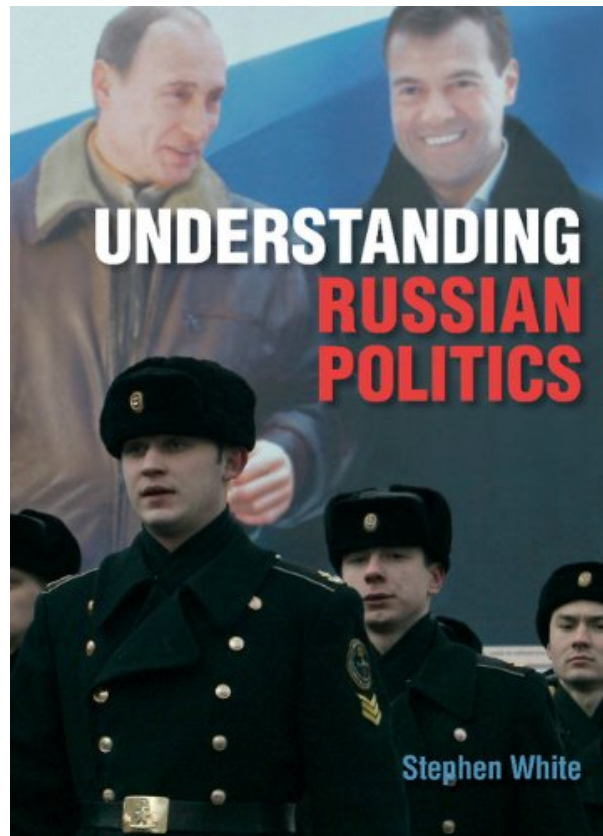
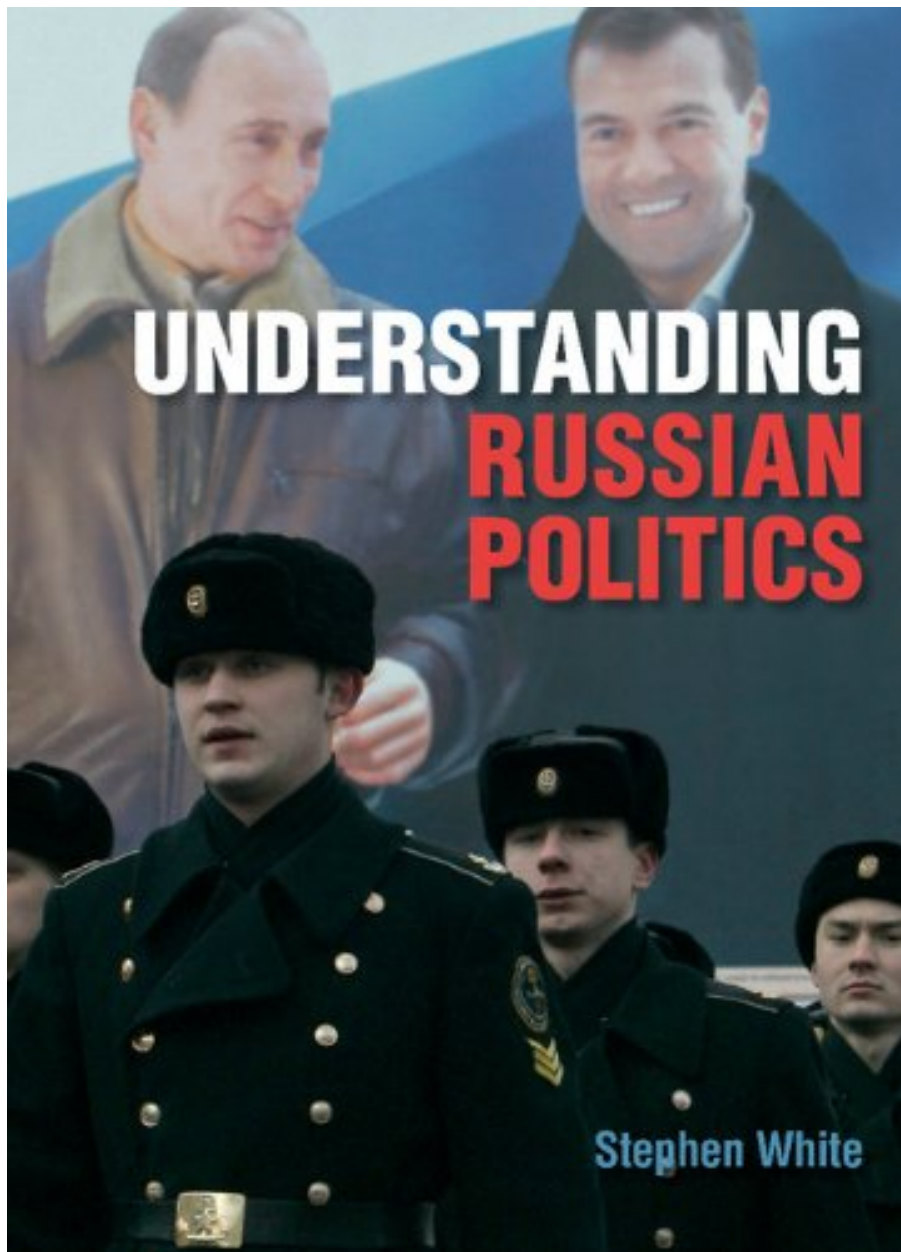


UNDERSTANDING RUSSIAN POLITICS BY STEPHEN WHITE



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Review

'Stephen White's thoroughly researched, well crafted, and parsimonious text is the best single overview I have encountered of the politics of contemporary Russia. It shows how Russia's post-communist system has stabilized, largely in an authoritarian mold, without yet being frozen in that mold.'

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'In this outstanding contribution, Stephen White presents a masterly analysis of contemporary Russian politics. Based on a close reading of the Russian press as well as by a lifetime devoted to the study of the country, White provides a dispassionate account of the controversial leaderships of Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin, allowing us to see their rule in the broader context of the forces shaping Russian politics. This is an outstanding account that is essential reading for students and anyone interested in contemporary Russia.'

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'Well-informed, well-written, and copiously documented, Stephen White's latest book is an impressive (and disturbing) portrayal of politics and society in post-Soviet Russia'

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"Stephen White has long been one of the leading experts on the former Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, and here he has distilled much of his vast knowledge into a single volume that provides what is perhaps the best analysis of Russian politics available today...This is an excellent book that can be strongly recommended for both the serious student of Russia and the general interested reader." -Peter Shearman, Webster University Thailand, POLITICAL STUDIES REVIEW

About the Author

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A fresh, authoritative interpretation of Russian politics by a leading authority, this textbook focuses on political developments in the world's largest country under Putin and Medvedev. Using Russian language sources, it covers economic, social and foreign policy, and the 'system' of politics that has developed in recent years. Opposing arguments are presented and students are encouraged to reach their own judgements on key events and issues such as privatisation and corruption. This textbook tackles timely topics such as gender and inequality issues; organised religion; krizis; and Russia's place in the international community. It uses numerous examples to place this powerful and richly-endowed country in context, with a focus on the place of ordinary people which shows how policy is translated to Russians' everyday lives.

- Sales Rank: #2861568 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Cambridge University Press
- Published on: 2011-05-09
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.72" h x 1.06" w x 6.85" l, 2.45 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 484 pages

Features

- Used Book in Good Condition

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Coverage is broad & deep --- most to be prized are the effects of elite political maneuverings on the population at large.

By Ronald Haak

Amazon's own synopsis (under "product information" on the main page) is excellent and reliable. An unexpected reward are the collected opinions of the Russian people themselves on the macro-topics presented, giving the results of population surveys on questions such as "Is democracy good or bad? What are its advantages and disadvantages? ('windbaggery & demogoguery" is the leading response to the latter in the survey quoted). Certainly the Russian people are not western democrats to the core who will gratefully come to full flower once authoritarian controls are removed. Historical developments have put the Russian experience in its own compartment and it's largely incomprehensible to westerners. In addition to emotionally neutral tables of statistics on a wide range of crucial topics, there's a generous helping of the particularistic effects of crime, poverty, housing shortages, corruption of governmental agencies & the like on ordinary people. There's an immensely revealing profile of Yeltsin and his (very "Russian"?) character and way of governing & living that is startling in the amount of chaos it contains. Another sensational section provides heaps of human interest details on the extravagances and boorishness of oligarch behavior that is described in detailed terms recalling the unrestrained flood of chaos of Ivan the Terrible. One oligarch worth tens of billions had a custom-made yacht built that's 2/3 the size of the Titanic and has its own built-in anti missile system. For a typical night in town, restaurant and wine expenses have been documented (\$650 a bottle, single cocktails at \$100 each) and a maitre de observed, "Western guests don't come here, they can't afford it." Their sex drenched entertainment venues are also described. When this heedless and seemingly endless wealth is contrasted with the ghastly and worsening poverty that is described for particular cases, one is entitled to the suspicion that a sense of collective responsibility is not even a blip on the pattern of boisterously throwing money around by the bushel. Surprising to westerners is that these national patterns of vehemence and misery do not move the Russian population to want to desperately rush toward and embrace existing western democracy on its own terms. Sufficient facets of the Russian character are examined to shed light on the nature of Russian discontents, their views on reforms and their distinctive (and to us, obscurantist) response patterns riddled with the expectation of authoritarianism.

The nature and specifics of Putin's rule are well described and these, like the entire book are well chosen, deftly organized, lucidly written and offer smooth reading.

Despite its title this is not a book that focuses on the narrow topic of elites jockeying for power with boring lists of committee names, chairman's names and power chains. The material is of a broad nature rich with abundant insights into the Russian character and the otherwise unheard voices of the Russian people.

The book does not take the position that western reforms are indicated or even desirable (i.e., feasible). It treats the Russian experience as a phenomenon with its own distinctive trajectory and character. It is what it is. Some problems have no solutions and the politics described in this book seems to accept this, as do vast sectors of the population.

I don't see this as a reference book, but as more of an eye opener for the serious, general reader who will put together solid generalizations about Russia the Enigma and keep these intact as time passes. One fast moving reading will be enough.

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