



BOOK REVIEW

Samuel A. Greene, Graeme B. Robertson (2019). Putin v. the People. The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia. Yale University Press

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In this highly readable book the authors challenge the prevalent approach in authoritarianism studies, which focuses predominantly on the ruling elite, and aim to analyze the “relation between the Russian people and their authoritarian state” (p. 5). The idea of “co-construction of power” in contemporary Russia lies at the center of the book’s argument, which highlights emotional commitment to the President. The latter is as important as a repressive state apparatus in sustaining Russian authoritarian regime. The authors emphasize that “the power generally ascribed to Putin himself actually stems from millions of private citizens willingly acting as unprompted enforcers of Putin’s power in society... through small scale social pressure” (p. 12). Why do ordinary Russians support their authoritarian ruler? Firstly, it is important to note that over the last 20 years this support was not achieved by the same means and was not based on the same reasons.

During the 2000s, the Kremlin’s “goal for the most part was to keep politics away from the people and the people away from politics” (p. 25). Thus, following the maxim “Don’t excite the people”, the ruling elite could consolidate its power in a trade-off for economic development with the majority of the population who eagerly engaged in the individual pursuit of prosperity. However, the large protests of 2011 that ensued after the “castling” between Medvedev and Putin

challenged that strategy. Now “the goal was to transform passive acceptance of Putin’s rule into active participation in that rule by using tried and tested political technologies to mobilize supporters and demonize opponents” (p. 25). These technologies included creation and manipulation of ideological cleavages, or “wedge issues”, such as conflicts over “traditional values” (protection of religious feelings, “LGBT propaganda” ban); normalization and legitimation of current regime by pervasive social institutions such as school, church, employment; adjusting Putin’s image and making him a symbol of the Russian nation and personification of its geopolitical success. The image of the “gatherer of lands” evolved in the context of the conflict in Ukraine when the Crimean Peninsula joined the Russian Federation. Thus, as the authors observe, “Russia emerged from the crucible of annexation and war and global geopolitical confrontation a different country: one in which support for Putin would be based not on fortunes of the economy or the successes of his policies, but on emotion, on pride and on a rekindled sense of Russian identity” (p. 121).

Secondly, this change in the strategy also required a tighter grip on the Internet. By 2012, when television was already steered from the Kremlin, the time was ripe to curtail the freedom of speech in the Internet, to take control over major Internet platforms (social network VK, RIA news agency, etc.), and to deploy “troll factories,” which produced “Kremlin-approved version of online reality”. Thus, to use Hannah Arendt’s term, “a lying world of consistency” (p. 106) was constructed by both television and Internet media. However, fear of repression or broadcasted lies cannot alone account for the long-term enthusiastic support for the Russian President. Collective “effervescence” of the Russian Spring would obviously have an expiry date. Therefore, the authors delve deeper into the “Russian soul” and use social psychology to answer the question why ordinary Russians support their authoritarian ruler. With the typology of personality traits known as OCEAN (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism), the authors could find that “respondents who were high on agreeableness – who think of themselves as sympathetic and warm, rather than critical and quarrelsome... – were seven times more likely to vote for Putin than those who were low on agreeableness, and they were four times more likely to give Putin a high approval rating” (p. 147). This paradoxical finding that nicer people prefer iron-handed leadership could be explained, in the authors’ view, by three major features of the Russian political landscape rather than by some innate qualities of Russian character. Firstly, in post-Soviet Russia, both before and during Putin’s rule, politics is very much focused on the person of the President, “which makes criticism and disloyalty closely associated with each other” (p. 149). Secondly, as was mentioned above, the Russian media environment is jealously guarded and thoroughly managed by the Kremlin. Thirdly, real ideological divides are absent in the political arena, while nationalism is highly important (p. 151), therefore, “politicians compete in their enthusiasm for Russian patriotism” (p. 151) rather than discuss specific policies or programs. On the one hand, it allows to downplay the differences among Russians and to emphasize their uniqueness in contrast to, in particular, the “Westerners”. On the other hand, it also

makes it very easy to stigmatize those who do not have mainstream views. Thus, the “big three” of Russian politics – “autocracy, state-dominated media, and non-ideological, patriotic politics” (p. 152) – create a different psychological terrain in which political choices have to be made. If the decisions are made dependent on the “friend-enemy” radar, then agreeable people who care for others’ opinion about them tend to follow what they perceive as mainstream views, or rather “what they are told is patriotic, communitarian, “normal” position” (p. 152). Thus, psychological conformism can account for the “social consensus around the inevitability and righteousness of Putin’s rule” (p. 205). This conformism makes it “hard to think of alternatives” and raises the “costs of being critical” (ibidem).

Although, as the authors recognize, there is little hope for change: “For the time being... the Kremlin is winning” (p. 214), autocracy in Russia is not inevitable, because there is neither historical nor cultural predisposition for “strong man’s rule”. Russians, like many others, value their freedoms and support freedom of speech, fair courts, and free press. Moreover, potential erosion of this authoritarian consensus is not impossible. Major changes can result from the discontent with the economic failures of the current regime as well as from the weariness of the lack of choice such as Vasily’s “sigh of an oppressed creature” – “I don’t see anybody... Nobody at all” (p. 222). Finally, the opposition has developed national networks which with “the strength of the weak ties” (p. 186) might be instrumental in the next election cycle to mobilize all dissenting forces to vote for the alternative.

While the hope is faint, the authors build their argument on the assumption that the change is possible and will probably come from elections. Two remarks might be relevant in this context. First, it is quite clear from the interviews that Russians do not regard the current opposition as an alternative (as is pointed out by the authors, p. 206). I would emphasize the difference between electoral alternatives and alternative power structures. “Systemic” opposition and non-“systemic” opposition are similar in that both have the power to mobilize certain sectors of society. The foremost converts this capacity to mobilize votes into resources (offices, finances, access to media), while the latter is curbed from exercising its potential to the fullest extent prior to elections and from benefiting from some victories it incidentally achieves after the elections. However, the “real” power includes the capacity to distribute resources, to establish the rules and enforce them, which actually predates election cycles. For “ordinary” Russians, the distinction, therefore, between the authorities and opposition is not merely between, as propaganda would have it, “order” and “chaos”, “stability” and “revolution”, but between “real power” and “spouters”. To become powerful, the opposition networks would have to be able to achieve more than mobilization, they would need to have the capacity to distribute resources and demonstrate a viable organizational model, and do that obviously in a hostile environment.

Secondly, there seems to exist a deeper moral consensus between the current authorities with their sinister origins in secret services and many “ordinary” Russians. One of the interviewees justified – quite ambivalently – her support for Putin the following way: “We’ve lost our position, our authority”, she [Marina] said.

“Every year they just keep pushing us down, down, humiliating us. It’s offensive. From the point of view of an ordinary citizen, well, I just think we have the wrong foreign policy. I mean, in some areas we need to be more firm. Look at the Soviet Union, for example, which I remember, I’m of that age. Because they may have called us the Evil Empire or whatever, but when it came to our athletes, they were always protected and nobody would dare to say a word against them. It was simply unthinkable, even though, I’m sure, they were taking those drugs back then, too. So something’s wrong with our foreign policy” (pp. 202–203). Marina, disconcerted with the wrong foreign policy, sees no wrong in foul play, she seems quite unperturbed by her recognition of presumed dishonesty of Russian athletes and prefers power over fairness. I believe she and the current Russian authoritarian regime would agree with the Game of Thrones’ character Cersei that “power is power”, and who ultimately wields it in Russia is no secret to “ordinary” Russians.