Understanding Putin's Russia and the Struggle over Ukraine

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Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War. By Paul D'Anieri. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 292p. $84.99 cloth, $29.99 paper.

The Return of the Russian Leviathan. By Sergei Medvedev. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020. 250p. $74.95 cloth, $24.95 paper.

Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity. By Gulnaz Sharafutdinova. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 256p. $99.00 cloth, $29.95 paper.

Elections, Protest, and Authoritarian Regime Stability: Russia 2008–2020. By Regina Smyth. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 264p. $99.99 cloth.

Pity the political scientist studying Russia. How does one analyze such a highly personalistic regime, in which key decisions are made behind closed doors and democratic elements have been squeezed out over the past decade? How should one assess the politics of a country that is a geopolitical outlier: the largest territory in the world, with borders from Norway to North Korea, and that has played a decisive role in every major European war of the last 200 years?

The current crackdown on "foreign agents," which includes the closure of universities and NGOs and the arrest of journalists and activists, leads to more practical concerns: Is it safe to send your graduate students there? Are you getting Russian colleagues into trouble if you coauthor with them?

These challenges are tackled from different angles in the four books under review here. Three try to unpack the internal dynamics of the Russian political regime, whereas the fourth explores Russia's relations with Ukraine. The latter issue turns out to be key to understanding the former.

Gulnaz Sharafutdinova combines her insider understanding of Russian society with her American political science training to provide an insightful account of the Russian worldview that neither demonizes nor idealizes Russia. She argues that Putin appealed to Russians because they were nurturing a shared sense of shame and humiliation stemming from their traumatic experiences of the 1990s. The shock of the collapse of the Soviet Motherland was followed by a wrenching economic depression and the rise of a corrupt oligarch class. This mindset was not a return to Soviet thinking, as many suggest, but a reaction to the traumatizing loss of the Soviet world: "throwing an entire civilization into a dustbin of history was painful" (p. 95). Hence, "the country was looking for a group savior, and Putin worked to fit this role" (p. 101) using his mastery of "emotional intelligence" (p. 105). For Sharafutdinova, the 1990s were thus both a real trauma and one that was "socially constructed" by the Kremlin and cultural elites, with a key role played by figures like the "political technologist" Gleb Pavlovsky and conservative intellectual Sergei Kurganian (pp. 113, 119).

In the 2000s, Putin uneasily combined neoliberal economic policies with a centralization of political control. The strains between these two policies were revealed by the popular protests of 2011, so Putin shifted to a new legitimation strategy: nationalism. Prior to 2014, Putin's popularity tracked Russian economic performance. However, the correlation broke down after the annexation of Crimea, which triggered a 20% jump in his approval rating in a single month (p. 14).

In Chapter 3 Sharafutdinova richly conveys the texture of the Soviet worldview and its lingering impact. Two enduring features, which Putin has amplified, are the appeal to Soviet/Russian exceptionalism and conflict with the outside world. This narrative combines heroism (World War II) and victimhood (the "wild" 1990s). Putinism reflects the "mass common sense" (p. 27) of the people who are "experiencing phantom pains of the lost limb of Soviet greatness" (p. 176). Sharafutdinova

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equivocates over the sustainability of this model, arguing that "a political system based on a cynical exploitation of the emotional sore spots" will "drag Russia down the path of dangerous political confrontation and economic stagnation" (p. 176).

Sharafutdinova combines personal reflections with analysis of popular culture (movies, documentaries, social media, and TV chat shows), supplemented by opinion surveys and focus groups in two regional cities. She argues on this basis that Putin is the crystallization of Russian identity, a mirror in which the society sees itself (p. 41). A key role is played by state-controlled media, with frequent quotes from Vladimir Solovyev, Russia's Sean Hannity (via Jerry Springer). Sharafutdinova also had two trigger questions inserted into a national survey in 2017 highlighting external challenges to Russia, but they did not affect support for Putin (p. 47).

Sharafutdinova tends to treat the Russian public as a single bloc, united in their support for Putin (the so-called Putin majority). Given her focus on social identity as the key framing concept, one might have expected to see more discussion of intersectionality—the impact of race, ethnicity, class, and gender – which dominates identity politics in the United States. Yet these factors are largely absent from her analysis, as is religion (mentioned briefly on p. 32). This is puzzling given that one of her two focus groups was in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, an ethnic republic that won a high degree of autonomy in the 1990s. One wonders whether Tatar memories of the 1990s are less negative than those of ethnic Russians.

If Sharafutdinova is exploring the mindset of ordinary Russians, Sergei Medvedev is channeling the angst of the Russian intelligentsia, dismissively referred to by their foes as the "creative class." *The Return of the Russian Leviathan* is a collection of 56 short essays originally published in Russian in 2017. Passionate and witty, it won the London Pushkin House prize for the best nonfiction book on Russia in English—the first time it was awarded to a native Russian author. (The essays were originally written as newspaper articles; the date and place of original publication are not provided.)

Medvedev is a Moscow-based political scientist with extensive experience in Germany, Finland, and the United States. His stories offer a postmodern mosaic of impressions of a resurgent Russian state that is simultaneously all powerful and incompetent, terrifying and farcical. Russian leaders are living in the past, unable to adapt to the interdependence and fluidity of the modern world. The "party of post-imperial resentment" has routed the "party of globalization" (p. 114). But the Russian state is operationally incompetent and cannot effectively control events within its borders—so it is not a Leviathan in the Hobbesian sense but a simulacrum of one.

The essays are grouped into four sections: geopolitics, symbols, biopolitics, and historical revisionism. Medvedev does not formulate an overall causal argument, so the reader is left to piece together what all this means from his witty *aperçus*. He is much more pessimistic than Sharafutdinova, even though they concur on many of the empirical observations.

According to Medvedev, with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin abandoned pragmatism in favor of a journey into Russia's unconscious (p. 13): "there is no point in looking for a rational basis or for any systemic boundaries in this revolution" (p. 14); Kremlin geopolitics is just a form of mystical thinking (p. 33). The "Jihad in Donetsk"—that is, the Russian-supported rebellion in East Ukraine—can be seen as part of a global trend of terrorism and "de-modernization" (p. 20). Russia still has an imperialist mentality, deriding Ukraine as the "pork fat republic" (p. 37) and rejoicing in its ability to bomb distant lands such as Syria (p. 39). "Russia has built its whole external and internal agenda on the demonizing of the Ukrainian Maidan" (p. 55). The Russian state operates like a racketeer, with different branches of the state apparatus coming up with new threats: gays, foreign adopters, Pokemon, Jehovah's Witnesses, Svetlana Alexievich, Ukrainian fascists, and so on (p. 82). As a result, for Medvedev, "Russia's principal export has become not oil and gas, but fear" (p. 90).

In striving for sovereignty, the Russian state has turned itself into an international pariah akin to Iran or North Korea, subject to sanctions that hamstring its ability to ensure economic prosperity (p. 56). "Wounded pride" and an obsession with recognition from the United States are a shallow foundation on which to build a foreign policy.

The biopolitics section of Medvedev's book contains some of the most piercing observations. He writes, "When an authoritarian regime has completely cleared the political field, the body becomes the frontline in the battle between the individual and the state" (p. 149). Or "at long last Russia has found its national idea, and this idea is homophobia" (p. 135). Russia has been gripped by a wave of antimodern mysticism: an Islamic clerical official in Dagestan defends female genital mutilation (p. 146). The Putin cult is reminiscent of the medieval doctrine of the "king's body" (p. 123): "We have to do what they did in Europe in the early modern period: replace this body with institutions, to divide the person of the ruler from the function of government" (p. 126).

The most cogent analysis is in the section on Russian *ressentiment* (pp. 218–28). For Medvedev, Russians are channeling Friedrich Nietzsche's slave mentality, with "helpless envy" of their Western masters (p. 220). These feelings were focused on Ukraine when it tried to join the West. "Ukrainians were too much like us for Russians to allow them simply to slip away quietly" (p. 219). Medvedev does not see any way out. The current protest wave has followed the path of the doomed 1825 Decembrist uprising: "individual dignity yet collective defeat" (p. 252).

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In contrast to Medvedev and Sharafutdinova, Regina Smyth does not treat Russia as a special case. On the contrary, she applies the same rational choice toolbox that has been used to analyze political strategies in some 900 closed and electoral authoritarian regimes since 1945 (p. 62). The book combines analysis of social movements and of electoral behavior, two literatures that are usually separate. Smyth tracks the evolution of government and opposition strategies over three election cycles between 2008 and 2020, developing and testing an impressive "Hybrid Election Management Game" to understand the strategic interactions between the regime and the opposition.

On this account, Russia is a hybrid regime combining formal democratic institutions (a constitution, regular elections) with the informal exercise of power by a ruling elite. Behind the façade of expanding authoritarianism, there is a constant battle of wills between the regime and the opposition. In hybrid authoritarian regimes of the Russian type, elections do matter, and the regime faces an uphill struggle in trying to accommodate a society that is being changed by social and technological progress. Russian civil society is weak but not powerless.

Most authoritarian regimes hold regular elections to maintain the appearance of democratic accountability while using various strategies to ensure that their favored candidates always win. Information autocrats can use their control over the media to win elections without the need for crude repression. Election management tools include spoiler candidates, workplace mobilization, the co-optation of opposition leaders, and the falsification of results. Cheating is useful—even when you do not need to cheat, because the ruler is genuinely popular—because it intimidates the opposition (p. 57). However, there is contrary evidence over whether having elections prolongs the life of authoritarian regimes (p. 13), though having an effective ruling party does seem to help sustain them (p. 11).

Smyth argues that authoritarian rulers face a dilemma: by committing blatant electoral fraud or barring an opposition figure from running, the regime signals weakness (p. 37). Such "actionable information" can compensate for the frailty of civil society organizations and provide a focal point to trigger a protest cascade, as explored by Timur Kuran. Another paradox is that increased censorship reduces the flow of reliable information to rulers and hence creates uncertainty about voters' true preferences. Worldwide, only 29% of electoral autocracies and 12% of closed autocracies have reliable independent polling agencies (p. 33).

Elections necessarily open the political process to the masses beyond a narrow elite selectorate, and hence they are to a degree risky and unpredictable (p. 36). "Managing elections is a constant process of adaption to changing circumstances" (p. 217), and regimes can make mistakes opening the door to an "information cascade" (p. 216). A key regime strategy to ensure the desired outcome is to fragment the opposition. Smyth's model suggests that the regime will encourage weak opposition parties to run (and lose) but will shut down elections if strong opposition parties are able to compete (p. 47).

Smyth has admiration for the tactics of the Russian opposition in trying to chip away at Putin's power. She suggests that Russia came close to such an "information cascade" in 2011–12, after several years of preparatory work by opposition activists focusing on fair elections (Chapter 4). Putin's announcement that he was going to return to the presidency, followed by blatant vote rigging in the December 2011 State Duma elections, triggered mass demonstrations in Moscow and other cities. Even with massive cheating in many regions, support for the ruling United Russia party fell below 49% (p. 6). In 2013, opposition leader Aleksei Navalny was allowed to run in the Moscow mayor's race and came in second with 27% of the vote. After that, he was barred from running in the 2018 presidential election, but his "smart voting" strategy—encouraging people to vote for any candidate who is not a member of United Russia—has had some success in regional elections.

Smyth concedes that authoritarian regimes have "overwhelming advantages" in electoral competition and that among scholars there is "a dismal consensus that state power is too strong for relatively weak oppositions to challenge" (p. 74). Nevertheless, she sees the possibility for a revival of the protest movement. This rests on the assumption that there is a high degree of latent discontent among Russian citizens. If only the opposition would be able to trigger a protest cascade, the regime would be unable to stem the tide.

There are several reasons to err on the side of pessimism, however. First, Smyth herself notes that 70% of electoral autocracies worldwide were stable between 1998 to 2008, as were 59% of closed autocracies, so the odds seem stacked in Putin's favor (p. 9). Second, the protests in 2011–12 were confined to Moscow and a few other major cities, and the aggregate turnout in Moscow was 500,000—about 3% of the capital's population (p. 30). In the survey of Moscow protesters (2011–12) that Smyth conducted, 64% were university graduates and 59% under the age of 30 (p. 19). Third, we have the awkward fact that Putin remains incredibly popular. Even though his approval rating is declining, it is still above 60%. Smyth does not address the sources of Putin's popularity, such as the narrative of "traditional values" and the impact of the annexation of Crimea, until the end of Chapter 8 (pp. 196–200).

Finally, there is the uncomfortable reality that Russia has moved closer to a closed autocracy in the last few years. This was exemplified by the brutal repression of the mass protests in neighboring Belarus in August 2020, which Putin encouraged and facilitated by sending police and journalists to help the crackdown. That same month, opposition leader Aleksei Navalny was poisoned with a

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deadly nerve agent. On his return to Russia in January 2021 Navalny was jailed, his organization shut down, and several of its leaders arrested. Even his lawyer Ivan Pavlov was arrested.

Smyth's book went to press around August 2020. In the introduction she writes, "In 2024 Putin will face term limits as he did in 2008" (p. 23) and again refers to term limits on p. 151; however, in the conclusion she notes that the July 2020 plebiscite confirmed constitutional changes extending Putin's term potentially to 2036 (p. 212). Arguably, Putin's shift to a more closed autocracy proves the validity of Smyth's argument. The events of 2011–12 exposed the vulnerability of the regime, so the Kremlin decided to change the rules of the game and restrict the scope even for weak opposition parties to enter electoral competition or for social movements to organize around electoral fraud.

At what point do we declare an electoral autocracy a closed autocracy? According to V-Dem, Russia's electoral democracy score peaked at .51 in 1992, falling to .46 in 1999 and .26 in 2020. That puts Russia in the bottom 20% of countries, ranking 153 of 179 on liberal democracy and 143 on electoral democracy, between Uzbekistan and Bangladesh.[1]

Russia's relationship with Ukraine has been a crucial factor accelerating the downward trajectory of Russian authoritarianism. This point is front and center in Medvedev's analysis and is compatible with Sharafutdinova's argument, although she shifts the causal focus back to the trauma of the 1990s. After the 2004 "color revolution" in Ukraine Putin was fearful that a similar mass protest against corruption and rigged elections could spread to Russia. That accelerated a policy shift toward more authoritarian controls at home and stronger anti-Western rhetoric abroad. This culminated in the war with Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Paul D'Anieri provides a detailed but accessible analytical narrative of the evolution of Russia–Ukraine relations since 1991 in *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*. He knits together the domestic politics inside the two countries, the relationship between them, and their respective relations with the Western powers. D'Anieri also shows a mastery of the chronology of events and the ability to explain their trajectory through relevant international relations theory. He is admirably objective in his approach: were a Russian nationalist or Ukrainian nationalist to read this book, I think they would both be pleased or dissatisfied in equal measure (for different reasons, of course).

In D'Anieri's narrative, Ukraine's declaration of independence on August 24, 1991, in the wake of the failed hardliner coup, sealed the fate of the Soviet Union (p. 31). Although this declaration was subsequently confirmed in a Ukraine-wide referendum on December 1, 1991, many tricky questions remained: notably, what would happen to the nuclear weapons located in Ukraine and in the Soviet naval base of Sevastopol, Crimea. Even Russian president Boris Yeltsin, an advocate of strong ties with the West, said in 1992 that "the Black Sea Fleet was and always will be Russia's" (p. 39). Ukraine was persuaded to give up nuclear weapons in 1994 in return for security guarantees from Russia and the United States (p. 52), and in 1997 it granted Russia a 20-year lease to Sevastopol (p. 82), which was extended until 2042 in 2010.

Successive Ukrainian presidents have played a balancing act, seeking favors from Moscow, Washington, and Brussels without giving too much away in return. Bargaining over natural gas supplies was particularly strenuous, because Russia's main export pipeline to Europe goes through Ukraine. Ukraine's semi-pluralist political system, with power lying in the hands of business oligarchs, made it porous to foreign (especially Russian) influence. There was a striking spatial polarization in voting patterns between the pro-Brussels western region and the largely Russian-speaking southern and eastern Ukraine (p. 171). The 2004 Orange Revolution installed a pro-Western president, Viktor Yushchenko: Putin adviser Gleb Pavlovskii referred to it as "our 9/11" (p. 133). However, Yushchenko's government devolved into factional fighting, and Russian influence revived as pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych became prime minister in 2006 and won the presidency in a free and fair election in 2010 (p. 171). But 2004 was a turning point: after that, Putin was even more deeply suspicious of US and EU strategy toward Ukraine (p. 136).

Yanukovych pursued associate status with the EU, which would have lowered tariff barriers to Ukrainian exports and eased visa rules. However, signing it would have excluded Ukraine from Russia's own new customs union (p. 192), and in November 2013 Putin forced Yanukovych to back away from the deal with Brussels. That action triggered the street protests that culminated in the February 2014 Maidan revolution.

Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 was the first border change by force of arms in Europe since 1945. The Russian-supported insurrection in Donbas has cost 14,000 lives and caused more than 1 million people to flee their homes. Seven years later, there are no credible plans for resolving the conflict. The big questions remain: Could this conflict have been avoided? What were the reasons behind Putin's decisions, and was it rational for him to behave the way he did?

D'Anieri adopts a position of "neoclassical realism" and attributes the conflict to deep structural factors: democratization and European integration on the Ukrainian side and Russia's return to great power politics on the other. "This did not make war inevitable, but it did guarantee a certain amount of friction" (p. 10). The end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union created a vacuum in European security, and all the powers involved proved

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woefully inadequate when it came to crafting an alternative security architecture.

D'Anieri argues that the war exemplifies the "security dilemma," with NATO expansion as the primary factor (p. 259). He writes, "Both the EU and Russia misunderstood how serious the other was about Ukraine" (p. 251), and "Russia's efforts to enhance its security left it less secure" (p. 274). But was this really a dilemma, exacerbated by poor communication and mutual misperception? It looks more like a case of a direct clash of interests, what Immanuel Kant would have called a "real opposition." The post-Maidan leadership of Ukraine *did* want to join NATO and probably would have tried to expel the Russian Black Sea Fleet from its Sevastopol base in due course.

Despite these deep structural tensions, Russian–Ukrainian relations muddled along throughout the 1990s and 2000s, stopping well short of an escalation to violence. Some would argue that the events of 2014 were the result of a deliberate decision by Vladimir Putin. Others— including D'Anieri—see a congeries of contingent factors coming into unfortunate alignment, with tragic consequences (p. 20). There is a sense in which every war is avoidable, and at the same time every war is desired (by some) on both sides. Certainly, President Yanukovych bears a lot of the blame, engaging in actions that amped up the political polarization in Ukraine: changing the rules of the game to accumulate more power, mishandling the 2013–14 street protests, and bungling negotiations over the EU association agreement.

D'Anieri refers to "the consensus in Russia that Ukraine was 'really' part of Russia" and goes on to argue, "It seems unlikely that Putin would have ordered the annexation of Crimea if it had not been massively popular" (p. 18). We know that the annexation was popular *after* it took place, but where is the evidence that Putin had any information about how popular it would be *before* it happened? In February 2014 events were moving very quickly and caught everyone by surprise. Would ordinary Russians, if asked, have had an opinion on the hypothetical of the annexation of Crimea? And does Putin really care about public opinion when he is making these kinds of strategic decisions?

There is some discussion of different factions in Moscow (pp. 68–71), but in general D'Anieri tends to treat Russia as a unified actor and does not particularly draw on Russian sources to try to unpack the decision making in Moscow. (The book has footnotes but no bibliography, which makes checking sources a little tricky.) In reality, Russian elites were sharply divided over security policy, and the aggression toward Ukraine signals the triumph of the *siloviki* (the security hardliners).

Polling suggests that ordinary Russians' attitudes toward Ukraine were somewhat ambivalent but turned more negative after March 2014. In a November 2014 survey, 62% of Russian respondents thought Ukraine should cede Russian-majority districts (including Crimea) to Russia.[2] Yet only 11% thought Ukraine had no right to exist as a state. According to an April 2021 Levada Center poll, 50% of Russians had a positive view of Ukraine and 35% a negative view.[3] The same survey found that Russians were split over the prospect of renewed fighting in Donbas: 43% thought Russia should intervene with military force, and 43% thought it should not. Although Russians may regret the fall of the Soviet Union, there seems no enthusiasm for trying to resurrect it by merging with Ukraine. After the publication of D'Anieri's book, Putin in July 2021 published a long essay on the history of Russia and Ukraine, claiming that they are a "single people," thus implying that the Ukrainian state does not have a right to exist.[4]

Few analysts expect to see regime change in Russia in the foreseeable future. Change could come through a lost war, a palace coup, or a popular revolt— or all three, since that unlikely combination of circumstances that caused the Soviet Union to collapse. One might imagine that Putin has learned some lessons from the Soviet collapse and from China's rise—that modest economic reform is good and political reform is risky. But Putin's harsh authoritarianism and foreign policy adventurism are strangling economic development, a formula that looks a lot like Leonid Brezhnev's Soviet Union.

The constitutional changes pushed through in 2020 mean that Putin could stay in power until 2036, so they have suppressed speculation about the Putin succession (for the time being). Azerbaijan and Chechnya have seen father–son dictatorial transitions, and Belarus might follow suit. But dynastic succession is unlikely in Russia, because Putin has no son, just two daughters (plus some more offspring, off the books). Given the regime's toxic hypermasculinity, it is hard to imagine one of his daughters replacing him as the ruler of Russia. That is probably the only good news to come out of this survey of the state of Russian politics.

Notes

1 V-dem, https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/; "Autocratization Turns Viral," February 2021, https://www.v-dem.net/en/.

2 Mikhail Alexeev and Henry Hale, "Russians See Ukraine as an Illegitimate State," *Washington Post*, May 20, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/20/russians-see-ukraine-as-an-illegitimate-state/.

3 Levada Center, "Ukraine and Donbas," April 16, 2021, https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/04/16/ukraine-and-donbas/.

4 Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Ukrainians and Russians," July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

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