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Timothy Frye. ***Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia.*** Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780691212463 (hardcover, $24.95/ £20.00).

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University Northridge, Emeritus

Timothy Frye's *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* was published in April 2021, written several years earlier, and the H-Diplo reviews were submitted in October and November. Consequently, neither the book nor the reviews deal directly with the Ukraine crisis precipitated by Russian President Vladimir Putin in December 2021. However, Frye does evaluate Putin's foreign policies in general and refers to the earlier crisis in 2014 when Putin seized Crimea and provided arms and soldiers to support the ongoing armed resistance in the two eastern provinces of Ukraine of Luhansk and Donetsk. Frye's assessment offers a striking thesis on Putin's foreign policy objectives and strategies as part of his central argument that Putin is less of traditional Russian tsar or a Soviet party leader and more closely resembles a personalist autocratic leader like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey or Viktor Orbán in Hungary with the very significant difference in Russia's immense territory, modern military forces, and nuclear weapons.

Frye developed his thesis through extensive primary research during his years of working in Russia as well as his continuing research as a social science professor, with particular attention to Russian public opinion surveys and administrative data which were accessible until Putin's regime began to close off research opportunities with political restrictions. Frye's social-science training is evident in his response to the reviews, where he argues that interpretations that emphasize the influence of historical and cultural factors on Putin and his advisers need to "identify "mechanisms that allow historical legacies to produce effects through time, explain why certain legacies matter but others do not, and account for why a legacy is reappearing at one point in time rather than another."

To the distant American observer, foreign policy academic, or US National Security official, Putin may not appear to be a "Weak Strongman." Frye develops this concept by identifying the constraints on both the domestic and foreign policy sides of Putin's leadership and through comparison with the challenges faced by other personalist autocratic leaders, some of whom did not survive. This comparative evaluation provides insights on Putin's leadership after he became president in 1999 and again since 2012. Frye explores domestic restraints on Putin with respect to his need to promote the economy but at the same time keep enough money flowing to his leading supporters, leading to corruption which weakened the economy. Putin's assertive foreign policy has support from Russian nationalists, "hard-liners in security agencies" and the military but does not bolster the economy and living standards. As Putin strives to maintain his dominance, the "trade-off is central not only in domestic politics but also in foreign policy too" (165). Frye illustrates this with the example of Putin's policy toward Ukraine. The Russian president gained four years of popular support for seizing Crimea with little immediate financial or military losses, but this also "removed the largest and most pro-Russian voting bloc … from Ukrainian politics" and turned political parties that had been "openly sympathetic to Moscow" to a more Ukrainian nationalist orientation. (166) Ukraine has also turned to the European Union as its largest trading partner; the US and the European Union imposed economic sanctions on Moscow; and NATO increased spending by $100 billion and moved troops to the Baltic states and to Poland.

The reviewers are impressed with Frye's study, his thesis, and his assessment of the domestic and foreign policy issues that Frye covers. Kathryn Stoner whose recent book *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order*,[1] which is the subject of a forthcoming H-Diplo Roundtable, applauds Frye's development of the personalist autocracy thesis in contrast to more traditional interpretations that emphasize either that Putin is "omnipotent, omniscient, and seemingly invulnerable" or that "Russia is historically and culturally exceptional, uniquely defined by its expansive geography, imperial and then Soviet history of autocratic governance and defensive in its foreign policy given a long suspicion of foreigners." Bryn Rosenfeld agrees with Stoner on the insights gained about Putin in Frye's comparative analysis of the "trade-offs that personalist autocrats—that is, those who concentrate power in their own hands, rather than rule via a single party or military—must constantly balance." Rosenfeld also appreciates that Frye's study avoids an approach that appeals only to either academic Russian specialists or policy makers. By adding his own experience in the Soviet Union and Russia and

[1] Kathryn Stone, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

writing with a clarity and "verve rarely seen in the pages of academic journals," Frye has created a book that will inform and appeal to students and policy specialists, Rosenfeld argues. Michael Kimmage notes a number of strengths in *Weak Strongman*, describing it as "a clearly written, well-argued inquiry into fundamental questions of Russian politics. Its use of survey data is creative, persuasive and original. It reveals that Putin is neither the conquering hero of his own propaganda nor the distant mafia boss many of his critics believe him to be." Rosenfeld applauds Frye's suggestion that "if Russian politics do not hang on Putin, neither does Russia's future" which is not the "dismal view of Russian cultural or geographic determinism." Kimmage, with less optimism, suggests that different Russian leaders might purse a course of modernization, economic growth, bureaucratic competence, and sound policy rather than the "chimeras of global prestige and military domination."

The reviewers do question some of Frye's analysis and conclusions. Stoner suggests that Frye's assessment "does not contain a clear definition of 'strength' or 'weakness' and that "relative to other Russian leaders, Putin is an undeniable strongman" and "has a free-er hand than almost anyone before him, and possibly after. How weak a strongman is that really?" Kimmage agrees with Stoner that Putin is considered by Russians "as strong—and not weak—because he has given Russia its autonomy in a competitive, unforgiving and never Russophilic world. He has amassed enough military power and enough economic self-sufficiency to do this. He can say no to the West." Frye's gracious response to the criticism is that he used "weak" strongman as "more of a literary device than an analytic one … to highlight the many constraints facing Vladimor Putin … A more accurate title might have been *Constrained Strongman* but it does not exactly roll off the tongue." Kimmage also suggests that Frye's approach has an excessive social-science political approach with insufficient attention to the influences of history, literature, and culture on Putin and Russian perspective, one of the more traditional perspectives for interpreting Russian outlooks. "More attention to culture would have lent more texture to *Weak Strongman*," Kimmage notes, adding that "so would greater attention to history" as "culture, history, and tradition point to another way of looking at the nexus of strength and weakness of Putin's Russia." Frye admits some sympathy with this last criticism and notes that he tended "to emphasize the commonalities of contemporary Russian politics with other autocracies that have strikingly different historical legacies."

Participants:

Timothy Frye is the Marshall D. Shulman Professor of Post-Soviet Foreign Policy at Columbia University, Co-Director of the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, and editor of Post-Soviet Affairs. He received a B.A. in Russian language and literature from Middlebury College, an M.A. from Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs, and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia.

Michael Kimmage is a professor of history at the Catholic University of America. He is the author of three books: *The Abandonment of the West: The History of an Idea in American Foreign Policy* (Basic Books, 2020); *In History's Grip: Philip Roth's Newark Trilogy* (Stanford University Press, 2012) and *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* (Harvard University Press, 2009). He is the translator of *Wolfgang Koeppen's Journey through America* (Berghahn Books, 2012). HIs current project is an intellectual history of American foreign policy from 1991 to 2021. He holds a Ph.D. in American studies from Harvard University.

Bryn Rosenfeld is an Assistant Professor of Government at Cornell University. Her research on voter behavior in nondemocratic systems, development and democratization, and post-communist politics has been published in such journals as the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, and *Comparative Political Studies*. She is the author of *The Autocratic Middle Class* (Princeton University Press, 2021) and a Principal Investigator of the Russian Election Study, supported by the NSF.

Kathryn Stoner received a Ph.D. in Government from Harvard (1995) and is the Mosbacher Director of the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, and a Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, a Professor of Political Science (by courtesy) and a Senior Fellow (by courtesy) at the Hoover Institution all at Stanford University. In addition to many articles and book chapters on contemporary Russia, she is the author or co-editor of six books: *Transitions to Democracy: A Comparative Perspective*, written and edited with Michael A. McFaul (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins (2013); *Autocracy and Democracy in the Post-Communist World*, co-edited with Valerie Bunce and Michael A. McFaul (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2010); *Resisting the State: Reform and Retrenchment in Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); *After the Collapse of Communism: Comparative Lessons of Transitions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), coedited with Michael McFaul; and *Local Heroes: The Political Economy of Russian Regional Governance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Her most recent book is *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Review by Michael Kimmage, Catholic University of America

Timothy Frye's *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* is an unusual Russia book. There is so much that it does not do. It does not focus all that intently on the figure of President Vladimir Putin. It makes no claims for an eternal Russia. It upholds no thesis of the sort that condemns Russia to autocracy because of its 'strongman' history or its enormous borders or its centralized capital cities or its long winter or any other variable that can be plugged into this age-old equation. *Weak Strongman* does not dramatize the enmity between the United States and Russia. If there is no eternal Russia, there should be no eternal Cold War either, and Russians in Frye's assessment do not live to hate the West. Finally, Frye's book is very guardedly optimistic. Because Frye does not see Russia as abnormal – it is not the proverbial enigma-mystery-riddle of Western fantasy – he can envision for it a normal future. This would be a post-Putin Russia that is not necessarily an American-style democracy but that is less corrupt and more efficient than is today's Russia. *Weak Strongman* is an evidence-driven and very readable book. It is a great scholarly contribution as well as a public service to non-academic readers seeking to learn about Russian politics.[2]

Frye's stated purpose for *Weak Strongman* is to foreground academic research (especially on Russian society) and to avoid the headlines-driven presentism and hyperbole of much Russia-related journalism and policy writing. Not only does he pay close attention to the data, but Frye also adopts a comparitivist approach both to Putin and to Putinism. Frye eschews any notion of Russian exceptionalism. He decries events that are "treated as specific to Russia [which are] mirrored in autocracies around the world" (10). In Russia, Frye detects a variety of personalist autocracy, a category to which Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, Albert Fujimori's Peru and Nursultan Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan also belong: one part charismatic leader, one part nationalistic program, one part repression, one part pseudo-democracy. Personalist autocracies, which can last for a long time, are intrinsically brittle. As for Russia, "Putin has been unrivaled at home," Frye writes, "but achieving this primacy has come at the costs of a distorted economy, dysfunctional bureaucracy, and unsound policies – three keys to building state power" (viii).

In *Weak Strongman*, Putin's personality matters less than the paradox his twenty years of rule have created. Even beyond the manipulations of Russian mass media and beyond government efforts to inflate Putin's reputation, Putin is popular, Frye contends. So too is anti-Western and nationalist sentiment in Russia. Putin profited from and contributed to "the oil boom that doubled the size of the Russian economy from 1998 to 2008," Frye points out (41). Russia has a well-educated society, and it is "a solidly middle-income country" (91). Adjusted for purchasing power parity, Russia is the world's sixth largest economy. Putin's orientation of Russian foreign policy toward confrontation with the West – after he articulated this course at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 and acted on it in the Russia-Georgia War of 2008 and invasion of Ukraine in 2014 – has resonated with the Russian people. Putin's strength, then, is bound up with economic growth and an assertive Russian foreign policy. These are the pillars of the social contract under Putin. They are what he provides in return for the power and the wealth Russia has given him.

The paradox of Putinism is the weakness that silhouettes Russia's newfound strength. Putin faces many constraints, one from the backwardness of the Russian economy vis a vis the American, Chinese, and European economies and the other from a population that he cannot anger too much, cannot suppress too much, lest it turn on him and push him out. The Russian economy has been deteriorating since 2014; a system of personalist rule has left political institutions hollowed out and the logic of political change opaque. Crackdowns, which have been recurrent in Russia since 2011, indicate the fraying of the social contract.[3] Everybody knows that Russian elections are rigged, which is to the Kremlin's short-term benefit but

[2] On the evolution of Vladimir Putin's career and of his system of governance see: Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Vintage, 2016); Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

[3] On the problems of Putinism see: Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021; Anne Applebaum, *The Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York:

to its long-term detriment. For its stability and its prowess a great power relies on economic development and legitimacy. Putin is slowly degrading both sources of Russian might. Instead of a revolution or a palace coup, which Frye does not rule out, he simply predicts "Russia's long-term decline" (174).

An additional tension characterizes Russian politics. Prospects for a Russian democracy are not especially bright. "Only 16 percent of personalist autocracies are replaced by democratic governments compared to 35 percent of military-led autocracies," Frye notes (201). Russia's well-educated population might skew this ratio in favor of democracy, and survey data shows that the Russian political elite is more anti-Western and more anti-American than the population at large. Russia is an anomalous personalist autocracy, with a degree of openness and economic potential that might point it in the right direction as Frey understands it– more rule of law and more emphasis on "the agency of Russian society" (33). Yet Frye argues that Russia is the sole great power among the personalist autocracies. Perhaps this will lead Russia to modernize, since economic growth, bureaucratic competence, and sound policy are the three keys to building state power. Or perhaps Russia's great-power preoccupations will hold back its modernization, sacrificing good governance to the chimeras of global prestige and military domination. Putin in 2021, Frye asserts, falls on the wrong side of this tension. Other Russian leaders might arrange their priorities differently.

Weak Strongman is a clearly written, well-argued inquiry into the fundamental questions of Russian politics. Its use of survey data is creative, persuasive and original. It reveals that Putin is neither the conquering hero of his own propaganda nor the distant mafia boss many of his critics believe him to be. The comparitivist lens Frye so skillfully employs helps him to penetrate the matryoshka-doll obfuscation and mythology that swirl around Putin. Frye brings to life a Russian society that is contradictory and vibrant: it is not dough in the Kremlin's hands. Careful as he is to avoid prophesy, Frye may be right that the next chapter of Russian history – *rossiya bez Putina*, Russia without Putin, as is sometimes chanted on the streets of Russian cities – is being written. A better government may arise from the grinding weaknesses of this self-made strongman, one that is based on the strengths of Russian *society*, of which there are many. That is an outcome that would not be spectacular and not apocalyptic, but it is entirely consistent with Frye's balanced method of analysis.

Frye's method of analysis is also humane. Academic and non-academic books on Russia are too often weighed down by ideological baggage. The Cold War ensured that multiple exclamation marks came after any mention of the Soviet Union, setting a dark tone for the study of the Soviet Union. Going back before the Cold War, Russia has continuously played the 'other' to American democracy. Russia is the place where, as Abraham Lincoln wrote in an 1855 letter, political hypocrisy is "unalloyed," unlike the United States, which is presumably endowed with more sincerity. The tropes of Russia as foreign and fearful never quite dissipated after the Cold War. Some returned in 2014. They inundated American political culture in 2016, when Russia was turned into an object of wild-eyed theorizing, conspiratorial paranoia and vicious polemical in-

Anchor, 2021); Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019); Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017); Masha Gessen, *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013); Lilia Shevtsova, *Russia: Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007).

fighting.[4] Fiona Hill's 2021 book, *There Is Nothing for You Here*, is a memoir and policy book.[5] It offers its readers the worrisome scenario that unless the United States can address its inequality and polarization it will go the way of Putin's Russia. Over and over again one is met with Russia, in American writing about it, as metaphor. Frye ignores all of this – to his great credit. He does not give us a pronouncement on the 'real Russia,' but he does what he can to orient his research and his conclusions in this direction. The amount of normalcy he finds in Russia is in context almost radical.

Interestingly, *Weak Strongman* underscores Biden administration policy on Russia. The administration's attempt to calm the waters corresponds to the late-stage Putinism Frye describes, when "Putin fatigue appears to be setting in" (64). Putin can be left to deal with his own population. The United States should foster no unnecessary conflicts through which he could distract his domestic audiences. Cyber should be a priority, because big conventional military campaigns are unlikely at the moment. (Frye has survey data on the lack of enthusiasm in Russia for the Russian military presence in Syria and by extension in other territories in which Russia could choose to intervene.) U.S. policy must be able to envision post-Putin political regimes in Russia not because they are likely at the moment but because they are possible. Russia can be approached as a normal autocracy in relation to other autocracies, while Washington shifts momentum away from the depredations of autocracy, personalist and otherwise, and toward the preconditions for democracy. Frye's book could also underpin the guardedness of Biden's Russia policy. A country with a 16 percent chance of becoming a democracy and one with Russia's nuclear arsenal and cyber capabilities is a country to watch carefully. The weak strongman at is not that weak.

Frye downplays two sources of insight on Russia that do not derive entirely from the social sciences. These are literature and history. He makes light of the authors who enlist Fyodor Dostoevsky or Leo Tolstoy to prove that Russia is a Western or an anti-Western or a non-Western country. Frye warns against reductive literary cliches, but his book offers no space at all for culture whether of nineteenth- or twenty-first century provenance. This detracts somewhat from *Weak Strongman*. Since 1991, Russia has never been more Russian, though it was recently Soviet and is by any standards an ethnically diverse, multi-confessional country. Putin must navigate this world too, and he must navigate it culturally. So far he has managed to bridge Soviet and nationalist loyalties not perfectly but well enough to hold on. He also uses culture to bridge urban and rural constituencies, presenting himself as a modern worldly man from Leningrad/Saint Petersburg on the one hand and a rough-edged common Russian on the other. Culture can militate against Putin as well, whether it be the Russian avant-garde or the generational change that typically starts in cultural initiatives and culminates over time in political transformation. The cultural ferment of late imperial Russia or of the Soviet Union in the 1980s (and earlier) led to the upheaval of 1917 and of 1991, respectively. Such patterns are by no means dormant in Putin's Russia.

Because Frye gives no quarter to culture the subjects in his purview are flattened onto a political surface. Musing on the nationalistic, anti-Western mood of Russia after 2014 as well as the revival of the Russian Orthodox Church, Frye argues that they have "more to do with current events and government efforts to shape popular opinion than with deep-rooted attitudes and values specific to Russians" (32). Here Frye's frame is too simple or too narrowly political. Nation and culture walk hand in hand: they both flow from geography and language. Homeland is no trivial concept for any country, and it is everywhere particular. Ambivalence about the West cannot really be pegged to current events in Russia. It happens to be

[4] For examples of Russia presented as a rogue state and/or destroyer of American democracy see: Rachel Maddow, Blowout: Corrupted Democracy, *Rogue State Russia, and the Richest, Most Destructive Industry on Earth* (New York: Crown, 2021); Adam Schiff, *Midnight in Washington: How We Almost Lost Our Democracy and Still Could* (New York: Random House, 2021); Craig Unger, *American Komrpomat: How the KGB Cultivated Donald Trump and Related Tales of Sex, Greed, Power and Treachery* (New York: Dutton, 2021); Craig Unger, *House of Trump, House of Putin: The Untold Story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia* (New York: Dutton, 2019). Luke Harding, *Collusion: Secret Meetings, Dirty Money, and How Russia Helped Donald Trump Win* (New York: Vintage, 2017).

[5] See Fiona Hill, *There is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Mariner Books, 2021); and "The Kremlin's Strange Victory: How Putin Exploits American Dysfunction and Fuels American Decline" *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2021).

one of the abiding themes of Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's fiction and of so much splendid Russian art and literature. The cultural status of the Russian Orthodox Church proves little about Russian authoritarianism, it is true, but it anchors certain attitudes and a certain symbolism that are unique from Orthodox Church to Orthodox Church, from Russia to Estonia to Greece, as it were, and that need to be distinguished from the cultural-political dynamics of other Christian churches and of other religions. Through culture, religious symbolism shapes politics in Russia as much as politics shapes the church.[6] More attention to culture would have lent more texture to *Weak Strongman*.

So would greater attention to history. The patrimonial Russian state that was formed in the medieval era, and on which Richard Pipes based his interpretation of Russian politics, starting with *Russia under the Old Regime* (1974), maps quite easily onto Putin's Russia's: the lack of private property, the subordination of law to princely authority, the hierarchical power structure, the acquisition of power and wealth through personal relationships to the autocrat, the legitimation of power through war and through references to external threats and especially to those coming from the West.[7] Though Putin may not have to deal with a Politburo, he is not an un-Soviet leader. He is insulated from the public, unconstrained by real elections, the author of an official ideology and a ruler with considerable control over what can be said and done in the public sphere. Frye is right to not to apply an essential Russian authoritarian to Putin's regime. Yet centuries of authoritarian precedent and of personalist rule cannot be negligible factors in Russian politics, for they give Putin an advantage he would not have in France or Britain or India or in the United States. In Russia, Putin's style of politics is familiar. By no means does that circumstance minimize a desire among Russians for a new leader, a new form of government or a new social contract. Novelty has its appeal, and the status quo has its many obvious difficulties in Russia, but all political orders are grounded in tradition. In this regard, Putin has cards to play that are not available to any of his political opponents.

Culture, history, and tradition point to another way of looking at the nexus of strength and weakness of Putin's Russia, one which is less empirical and more inferential. Since the seventeenth century, Russia has been part of the European state system and an aspiring great power globally. A long history of imperial expansion – East, West, North and South – intersects with the sequenced traumas of outside invasion. The value and necessity of great-power status, which are embedded in Russian culture, are mirrored in the conviction that Russia is a civilization unto itself and a civilization that must be autonomous in order to be itself.[8] From this vantage point, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was not weak because he lost the Baltic Republics or because he let East Germany go. His sin, for which he remains unpopular in Russia, was that he undercut Soviet Russia's autonomy and left it in 1991 at the economic and geopolitical mercy of the West. Putin by

[6] Though the English-language literature on contemporary Russian culture is thin, for an excellent book see Joshua Yaffa, *Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin's Russia* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020). For works of history that connect art, literature and culture to national sensibility see: Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History* of Russia (London: Picador, 2003); Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and James Billington, *The Icon and the Ax: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1970). On the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian politics see: Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[7] See Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime*, second edition (New York: Penguin, 1997). On historical patterns that have set the tone for twenty-first-century Russia see also: Vladislav Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (New York: Yale University Press, 2021); Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941* (New York: Penguin, 2017); Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (New York: Penguin, 2015); Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime* (New York: Vintage, 1995); and Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russias, 1917-1991* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

[8] On the history of Russian and Soviet foreign policy see: Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Twelve, 2019); Dmitry Trenin, *Russia* (New York: Polity, 2019); Dmitry Trenin, *What Is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (New York: Polity, 2017); Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-first Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); and Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

contrast is regarded as strong not because he made post-Soviet Russia autocratic and not just because he boosted the economy after 2000, when he came to power. ("Putin is popular for the same reason Yeltsin was not: the economy," Frye writes, 59). Nor do Russians consider Putin weak for his personalist rule or his faltering economic policies. He is looked at as strong – and not weak – because he has given Russia its autonomy in a competitive, unforgiving and never Russophilic world. He has amassed enough military power and enough economic self-sufficiency to do this. He can say no to the West. He is therefore not a weak strongman in Russia. Among his supporters and even among some of his enemies, he is what the wrenching transition to the next stage required from a wrecked Communist economy and eviscerated superpower. He is a straight-up strongman. That even outright strongmen have weaknesses, and what these weaknesses happen to be for Vladimir Putin, are the salutary insights of Timothy Frye's excellent monograph, *Weak Strongman*.

Review by Bryn Rosenfeld, Cornell University

Russia's recent State Duma election again handed Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia a supermajority but, with less than 50% of the *official* vote, it was not an overwhelming victory. More repression[9] and at least as much fraud as in past legislative elections helped United Russia keep its seats.[10] But weak institutions allowed the Kremlin to rely much more heavily than a decade ago on the disproportionality of its electoral system, which is hardly a Russian invention. And this spared it the need for even more overt repression and rigging.

In the end, United Russia took about as many single-member district seats as it did in 2016. This result, however, conceals the fact that United Russia secured itself a win in many races, and many more than in 2016, with very weak support. The party's victory was propped up in large measure by the distortions of the first-past-the-post political system and Kremlin projects to fragment the opposition. A district of Khabarovsk that the Kremlin won with less than twenty percent of the official vote and where there were large anti-government protests just this summer illustrates the risks of too little fraud. The risks of too much fraud are clear in Moscow, where winning margins for the opposition in 12 of the city's 18 districts vanished once online voting results were reported.

No deep dive into Putin's personality or the factors that are unique to Russia sheds as much light on the Kremlin's approach to elections—and the most recent State Duma election, in particular—as a sober look at the trade-offs, weak institutions, and costs of repression that all personalist autocrats face. This is precisely the tack that *Weak Strongman* takes.

What *Weak Strongman* does so well is synthesize and systematize recent advances in understanding Russian politics, integrating Frye's own seminal scholarly research with that of other political scientists.[11] Scholars of Russia today have the benefit of a much broader range of data sources than they had in the past and new methods of analysis. Yet the relationship between academic Russia watchers and policy makers has become more distant. Bad writing, disciplinary jargon, and statistics only-for-the-initiated stand in the way. *Weak Strongman* ably accomplishes its task of translating this work into the vernacular. Frye's own personal stories -- from his Soviet-era experience as an exhibition guide for the U.S. Information Agency and from years since -- add the depth of lived experience to its social-science insights. And even the social science is delivered with verve rarely seen in the pages of academic journals. The result is a book that will appeal to students of Russian politics, in Washington and in university seminars alike.

A central premise of *Weak Strongman* is that our understanding of Russia remains limited, even distorted, when we focus too much on Putin, Putin's worldview, or on Russian exceptionalism.[12] Instead, Timothy Frye convincingly argues that

[9] For a roundup of the Kremlin's repressive tactics in the lead up to the vote, see https://www.csis.org/analysis/where-does-russian-discontent-go-here-russias-2021-election-considered.

[10] On falsification see, e.g. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/09/21/statisticians-claim-half-of-pro-kremlin-votes-in-duma-elections-were-false-a75102 and https://intellinews.com/russia-s-duma-elections-statistics-the-comet-effect-and-the-moscow-blob-221736/.

[11] On Putin's apparent popularity, see e.g., Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt and Ora John Reuter, "Is Putin's Popularity Real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33:1 (2017): 1-15. On elections, see Timothy Frye, Ora John Reuter, and David Szakonyi, "Political Machines at Work: Voter Mobilization and Electoral Subversion in the Workplace," *World Politics* 66:2 (2014): 195-228; on property rights in Russia see, Timothy Frye, *Property Rights and Property Wrongs: How Power, Institutions, and Norms Shape Economic Conflict in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[12] A number of recent monographs take up the subject of Putin and his worldview. See e.g., Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013); Steven Lee Meyers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Vintage, 2016); and Brian Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

power in Putin's Russia is not the unbridled power conjured by the classic image of the strongman ruler. The book is filled with the complex trade-offs that Putin and other nondemocratic leaders face, and in particular the trade-offs that personalist autocrats—that is, those who concentrate power in their own hands, rather than rule via a single party or the military—must constantly balance. Emphasizing the similarities between Russian politics and the politics of other authoritarian regimes, Frye builds the case that even a strongman like Putin faces constraints, and constraints that are shared broadly by other leaders like Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Hungary's Viktor Orban, and Peru's Alberto Fujimori. When leaders such as these cater too much to their cronies, they alienate the mass public. When they restrain their cronies to improve public goods provision, they can face an elite insurrection.

Popular accounts often underscore the power that Putin derives from state propaganda and depict media manipulation in Russia as virtually unchecked.[13] This narrative of Putin's penchant for controlling information is in part fed by his KGB background. Yet when it comes to informational autocracy, an area also of recent scholarly interest, Frye and others note that the Kremlin faces difficult constraints.[14] When personalist leaders manipulate too much, trust in state mouthpieces craters, as it has in Russian state television over the last decade.[15] When they manipulate too little, information that could reinforce anti-regime protest may reach citizens, as when Russia's independent TV Rain lifted its paywall to provide broader access to coverage of unauthorized opposition protests in advance of Moscow local elections during summer 2019.[16] On the sensitive issue of the economy, most evidence suggests that even a strongman like Putin struggles to distract citizens from economic problems, deflect responsibility for poor economic performance, or effectively shift the blame for a weak economy (despite trying mightily).[17]

In light of these constraints, one of the book's key insights is that if Russian politics do not hang on Putin, neither does Russia's future. Personalizing the strategies of rule that we see in Russia today, and crediting them to Putin, has the effect of heightening optimism about Russia's political future once he leaves the scene, as every aging autocrat does. This is not the dismal view of Russian cultural or geographic determinism. Nor is it the adjacent argument that Russians are ill-prepared for democracy and will continue to have – in Putin and after him – the leaders that they deserve. A nondemocratic leader is usually replaced by another nondemocratic leader, especially if the first presides over a personalist system like Putin. In Venezuela, for example, Hugo Chávez's passing did not precipitate democratization. He was replaced by Nicolás Maduro, also an autocrat. Chances are that Putin will be succeeded by another strongman, too.[18]

Here and elsewhere, *Weak Strongman* underscores the advantages of viewing Russia in comparative perspective. The book's great strength is in putting Russia alongside other personalist autocracies. Frye is not the only keen Russia watcher to

[13] E.g., https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/how-the-media-became-putins-most-powerful-weapon/391062/, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/06/opinion/for-putin-disinformation-is-power.html, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html.

[14] See Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, "Informational Autocrats," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33:4(2019): 100-127.

[15] https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/01/russians-trust-in-tv-news-falls-25-in-10-years-report-a66654.

[16] https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2019/07/26/153709-dozhd-otkryvaet-efir-i-snimaet-peyvoll.

[17] See e.g., Daniel Treisman, "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin," *American Journal of Political Science* 55:3 (2011): 590-609; Bryn Rosenfeld, "The Popularity Costs of Economic Crisis under Electoral Authoritarianism: Evidence from Russia," *American Journal of Political Science* 62:2 (2018): 382-397; Timothy Frye, "Economic Sanctions and Public Opinion," *Comparative Political Studies* 52:7 (2019): 967-994.

[18] See e.g., Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12:2: 313-331.

express apparent frustration with a sui generis approach to Russian politics. For example, Fiona Hill's *There is Nothing for You Here* similarly rejects Russian exceptionalism but focuses on the common concerns and political dynamics of post-industrial societies and their vulnerability to populist politics, a frame that puts Russia alongside the U.S. and UK.[19] In Hill's telling, patterns of governance emerge not only from the constraints that arise from autocratic rule, but from forces of economic decline and despair that weigh heavily on the politics of democracies and autocracies alike. Frye's pitch in *Weak Strongman* for leveraging comparison underscores the value of such an approach—even if research agendas in political science tend to be framed around the study of either democratic or autocratic politics.

In contrast with the narrative of economic decline, *Weak Strongman* in its closing pages on Russia's future expresses cautious optimism, which is again grounded in comparative perspective. Frye writes that "Russia is too rich and well educated to be so nondemocratic" (201-202). The claim rests on an expectation popularized beginning in the 1950s by modernization theorists, and influential in the social sciences ever since, that development leads to democratization.[20] Indeed, Russia is wealthier than many democracies, and its citizens are more educated, too. While that is true, the debate is not clearly settled, and recent academic research offers a more qualified projection. Min Tang and Dwayne Woods for example, find that when development is accompanied by a high degree of state economic engagement it has little effect on a country's level of democracy.[21] Accordingly, as I have argued elsewhere, Russia has failed to produce an educated middle class that is sufficiently autonomous from the state to effectively advance demands for democracy.[22] Russia's middle class remains divided, and thanks to the state's very significant role in the economy, support for democracy among key state-dependent constituencies is lacking. Russia may yet be able to persist in its 'paradox' of development without democracy for some time.

Weak Strongman is an evidence-based antidote to overheated debates on Russian politics. This is an important and timely book for all who wish to understand Russia beyond the headlines.

[19] Fiona Hill, *There is Nothing For You Here* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2021).

[20] E.g., Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," *The American Political Science Review* 53:1 (1959): 69-105; Carles Boix and Susan Stokes "Endogenous Democratization," *World Politics* 55:4 (2003): 517-549; Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[21] Min Tang and Dwayne Woods, "Conditional effect of economic development on democracy – the relevance of the state," *Democratization* 21:3 (2012): 411-433.

[22] Bryn Rosenfeld, *The Autocratic Middle Class: How State Dependency Reduces the Demand for Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

Review by Kathryn Stoner, Stanford University

We are now thirty years almost to the day since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the promise of the moment, only the three Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are now consolidated democracies, while Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova appear stuck in transition despite continuous attempts at political and economic reform. The other former republics are various forms of authoritarianism, with Russia now a consolidated autocracy under twenty plus years of President Vladimir Putin's leadership.[23] But despite the increased reliance on repression to keep his real and imagined opponents under control, too often we overestimate Putin's personal control over the system that has blossomed under his leadership. Timothy Frye's *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* provides crucial insights into the constraints Putin actually faces in ruling contemporary Russia. The book is designed for the specialist and for the simply 'Russia curious' – that is, those readers who may know something, but not that much, about modern Russian politics. It builds on other excellent recent scholarship on Russia that shines a light on different aspects of the system,[24] but *Weak Strongman* frames Russia's political system in the broader comparative framework of modern personalist autocracies.

In doing so, Frye seeks to challenge two prevalent approaches to understanding Russia. The first is that a seemingly omnipotent, omniscient, and seemingly invulnerable Putin so dominates Russia today that there really are no politics to speak of. The second is that Russia is historically and culturally exceptional, uniquely defined by its expansive geography, imperial and then Soviet history of autocratic governance, and defensive in its foreign policy given a long suspicion of foreigners. [25]According to this second narrative, it should be no surprise, therefore, that in the early twenty-first century Russia has reverted to form under Putin – the latest autocrat needed to govern this seemingly ungovernable country.

Frye offers a third approach that is a most welcome corrective – one that presents Russia under Putin as typical of a group of modern personalist autocracies like Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, Viktor Orban's Hungary, and Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey. Pursuing this comparative perspective, Frye argues, reveals a more complete picture of how Russia is ruled – and the intrinsic limits on Putin's power because they are typical of other personalist autocratic regimes. Despite his omnipresence in Russian and foreign media, and the strongman bravado he exudes whether fishing shirtless in the Russian wilderness, helping to vaccinate an endangered Siberian tiger, discovering a rare amphora in the Black Sea, or playing hockey with other members of his inner circle, Vladimir the Great is in fact … weak. In practice, he is constrained by incompetent state bureaucracies, elite infighting, and the uncertainty and policy tradeoffs that all politicians inevitably must face. Contrary to popular portrayals, even Putin cannot always do as he pleases in governing Russia.

Frye draws on his rich experience observing and understanding Russia over the last thirty years, and the book incorporates fascinating insights not only from his own significant scholarly contributions but also cutting-edge research from emerging Russian and foreign scholars to better understand what makes autocracy work in Putin's Russia, and where its weaknesses

[23] See Global Freedom Status, 2020, Freedom House, available at https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2021, accessed Nov. 5, 2021.

[24] See for example, Henry Hale's Henry Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Brian Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Chris Miller, *Putinomics: Power and Money in Resurgent Russia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

[25] Examples of work that focuses on Putin's psychology and personality as central to Russian politics would include: Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), Masha Gessen, *Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013), and Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Knopf, 2015); and examples on the "exceptional Russia" perspective include Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes, from the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), and James Stavridis, "What Russian Literature Tells Us about Vladimir Putin's World," *Foreign Policy*, June 2, 2015.

may lie.[26] *Weak Strongman* is a balanced and thoughtful analysis that challenges dominant narratives of Putin as omnipotent, and Russia as sui generis. In doing so, Frye makes a major contribution in highlighting recent scholarship that is too often overlooked. In this and myriad other ways, this book does a major service in demonstrating that in fact the academic community has a reasonably good understanding of how Russia works, and that it has much to contribute to the national policy debate on how to deal with it. The problem is that the gulf between the policy community and academia is too wide for this knowledge to be translated into American policy toward Russia. Instead, views on Russia remain polarized – for some in the United States, it is either "a gas station masquerading as a country" as Senator John McCain declared in 2014, with little else to rely on, but is led by an evil genius with Adolf "Hitler's foreign policy and [Benito] Mussolini's domestic policy." (7) Alternately, for some on the Christian right, Russia is a socially conservative, well-governed country on its way back to superpower status thanks to Putin's astute and crafty leadership. Frye seeks to demonstrate that Putin's autocracy is in fact "a subtler beast." (8)

Indeed, in writing the book, one of Frye's driving concerns was the disconnect between academia and policy actors in understanding Russia. Too often the policy debate on Russia resembles the Sovietology of yore – when analysts were left straining to see who in Joseph Stalin's Politburo was standing next to whom on Vladimir Lenin's Mausoleum during a military parade in an attempt to decipher the patterns of elite Soviet politics. Happily, in the twenty-first century, scholars have much better data and tools by which to understand modern Russia, and Frye aims to reveal what we know, and how we know it. Russia, it turns out, is not really an exceptional country governed by an exceptional ruler (11). It is a personalist autocracy that exists elsewhere, no longer the "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" of the past.[27] By comparing Russia under Putin to other personalist autocratic systems, we can see what is truly unique to Russia and to Putin himself.

Personalist autocracies, for Frye, have three shared attributes: First, they are inherently fragile, because the weak institutions that enable autocrats to exercise power unchecked by society also introduce unpredictability for the autocrat himself. Reliant as they are on personal charisma and control, without political parties to structure political competition, or rule of law to determine a regular cycle of elections that are free and fair, or a bureaucratic infrastructure reliably willing and able to implement policy, the systems are unstable. As Frye notes, rare are the autocrats who pass away peacefully in their sleep. Most die in office, usually violently either at the hands of rebels in a social uprising, or by the guns of their own militaries or by the betrayal of their own cabinet members.

Second, personalist autocrats face policy tradeoffs that constrain their power. They can be removed by elites, so the autocrats must choose to govern in their interests to keep them pacified and at bay, or to govern in the interests of society so that there is no sustained popular uprising that might topple the whole regime. Frye insists that governing in the interests of one necessarily comes at the expense of the other. Policies in Russia can be understood as Putin trying to balance these two competing forces, rather than as the result of his having deep political convictions. Indeed, as Frye notes, like any personalist autocrat, Putin is adaptive by necessity. It is difficult to know his core values because his policy preferences have changed over time. (18)

[26] Some fine examples include: Timothy Frye, *Building States and Markets After Communism: the Perils of Polarized Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Timothy Frye, *Property Rights and Property Wrongs: How Power, Institutions, and Norms Shape Economic Conflict in Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Timothy Frye and Ekaterina Borisova, "Elections, Protests and Trust in Government: A Natural Experiment from Russia," *Journal of Politics* 81:3 (2019): 820-832; Timothy Frye Ora John Reuter and David Szakonyi, "Hitting Them with Carrots: Voter Intimidation and Vote Buying in Russia," *British Journal of Political Science* 49:3 (2019): 867-881 and, Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter, "Is Putin's Popularity Real?, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33:1 (2017): 1-15.

[27] Winston Churchill, "The Russian Enigma" Broadcast October 1, 1939, http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/RusnEnig.html, accessed 11 March 2021.

Third, the personalist autocrat has only 'blunt' tools to manage modern society. Despite the repression of journalists in Russia today, or his tendency to wield 'the law' at political opponents like Alexei Navalny, Putin as a 'weak strongman' is restrained in the extent to which he can use force against those who disagree with him. Repression can be expensive, and overuse of it can spark further social protest (as indeed we witnessed in January of 2021 following Navalny's quick imprisonment upon his return to Russia from Germany where he had gone to seek treatment for a government-sponsored assassination attempt). Still, the wise personalist autocrat knows that it is nonetheless better to be feared than loved, as Machiavelli intoned – but it is best to be feared *and* loved. As a result, carrots – in the form of payoffs or preferential access to the use of state assets for profit -- rather than sticks can keep elite challenges at bay (although the occasional stick can help too). Generating popular approval from society either through genuine economic growth or foreign policy wins, or manipulated elections is an invaluable political resource in the struggle to keep the system stable.

So, even though Putin appears to be the unrivalled ruler of modern Russia, Frye argues, the political milieu renders him weak in practice, or at least weaker than one may have thought. Many of his policy preferences have not been translated into concrete policy outcomes, and he must be on constant guard against insatiable rent-seeking elites, and a society that is far from passive in expressing its dissatisfaction with attempts to curb state subsidies, for example. The life of a personalist autocrat tucked away in his mansion by the Black Sea or in the mountains around Sochi looks great, but evidently it is not.

Frye does a tremendous service to our understanding of modern Russia in pointing out the inadequacies of explanations of Russian behavior that are overly reliant on stereotypes of Russian culture and history – that an unruly people require a strongman ruler – and that Putin is just the latest one to fill the role. Russians today, like Americans, Poles, or Kazakhs, tend to respond to circumstances. Frye's book emphasizes the enormous changes that have taken place in Russian society in the last three decades. Russians can and do travel abroad, they use the internet, 97% of Russians have cellphones. They watch American, British, French and German television. They tend to express opinions and preferences that are consistent with populations of other upper middle-income countries. They live in an autocracy, but it is by no means your grandfather's Soviet Union. Despite elections that are often rigged, there is still genuine popular support for Putin. Frye underemphasizes the fact that state television of course does not actually allow many opposition candidates in national elections to appear, while Putin is ubiquitous. Nor does he address the fact that few anti-system opponents are permitted to run in elections, although he describes how some are kept off the ballot through administrative mechanisms.

The media is a powerful tool, and it is one that Putin's regime has wielded well almost from the start. Indeed, in explaining the constraints Putin and other personalist autocrats face, Frye's book tends to underemphasize the tools these leaders still have at their disposal. This can risk understating their actual influence in a system built around their personas. Weak institutions that might constrain what autocrats can accomplish also enable them to repress and restrain challengers and society if they are willing to use the security forces. While Frye is right that modern Russian politics is more than just Putin, he is still at the core of what is, even by Frye's telling, a *personalist* autocracy. The myth of Putin is central to maintaining his personal popularity among the average Russian relative to other branches of government. A personalistic authoritarian system requires a big personality. Thus, we get the emphasis of the legend of the leader – a KGB man, Orthodox Christian with conservative values, a defender of Russia, an everyman from St. Petersburg with humble roots, an athlete, a tough talker, a strongman.

Frye is right that Putin's actual career in the KGB is often overemphasized in efforts to explain his actions at home and abroad. He has brought former security officers into his government because he knows and trusts them, Frye insists, but this is not why the KGB's domestic successor agency, the FSB, is ubiquitous under Putin. Most personalist autocrats like security services for the repressive power they can lend, but they must be careful not to give their officers too much authority lest they turn it on the autocrat at some point in the future.

To a large extent, this all makes sense, but in the Russian case, current and former security officials hold key positions (Igor Sechin as Chairman of Rosneft,[28] for example) that are not within the repressive apparatus alone. In other personalist autocracies where the autocrat had a security or military background, they also tend to play an important role but usually in the actual area of security. The fact that former security officers are powerful political and economic figures in Russia makes a difference in how they view state and society relations, for example, which might contribute to the emphasis on statism and policies of renationalization in modern Russia. Indeed, we have a counterfactual case in Boris Yeltsin's terms as Russia's first elected president in the 1990s. Yeltsin did not come from a KGB background, and there was far less emphasis on the security services in his administration or in key economic posts; the same can be said of Dmitri Medvedev's brief presidency from 2008-2012 when members of the security services were not as prominent as they became when Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. This seems different in Russia today than even in Erdogan's Turkey, for example, where the security services play no similar role.

Putinology, along with historically or culturally deterministic approaches to Russia, attempt to explain *why* Russia is not a democracy today despite the promise of the 1990s. Frye's book changes the focus to *how* Russian politics works under Putin's long rule, deemphasizing its comparative differences relative to other personalist autocratic systems. Changing the focus in this way, he claims, can help us to understand the 2003 renationalization of the oil company Yukos, which was then owned by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest man at the time) not a vendetta against an oligarch who dared to challenge him politically as much as something that other personalist autocrats did when oil prices increased at around the same time. That may be true, but it does not explain why Putin seized all of Khodorkovsky's assets, beyond just oil, and why he did not act similarly against other oil barons at the same time and in the same way. That is, he did not renationalize *all* oil companies in 2003 (and Chavez actually renationalized in Venezuela later, in 2007), he seized one in particular, and then jailed its owner for 10 years on fraud and money -laundering charges. Further, as late as 2012, Russia's oil sector was still dominated by private companies when oil prices had already dropped considerably. But Frye's account of the seizure of Yukos as being typical of other autocrats' nationalizations of their oil industries when prices were high overlooks these important details. In fact in Russia at the end of 2003 (when Yukos was seized), prices were about US $45 a barrel, but at the end of 2007 (when Chavez acted in Venezuela), they were US $126 per barrel. [29] So the quick comparison of what happened in this case in Russia with oil nationalizations elsewhere leads to a misrepresentation of what actually happened with Yukos.

Despite the book's title, *Weak Strongman* does not contain a clear definition of 'strength' or 'weakness.' They appear to be relative to other elites and to society; both make demands to which even a personalist autocrat must respond. This important point is well taken. But the presentation of Putin's Russia as a 'normal' autocracy where the authoritarian faces constraints of which the developing world is replete with examples, misses another point of comparison. Relative to other Russian leaders, Putin is an undeniable strongman. For most of the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin ruled with the same constitutional authority as Putin (until the end of Putin's second term in 2008 at least) yet faced a recalcitrant parliament that attempted

[28] Sechin is thought to have worked for the KGB in the 1980s in Mozambique and Angola, although he was officially an interpreter with Soviet trade and diplomatic missions. He is also thought to have worked dealing in and smuggling weapons for the USSR in Latin America and the Middle East. See for example https://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/politics-and-society/igor-sechin/index.html

He worked as Putin's personal secretary in the St. Petersburg city government after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he then moved to Moscow to work in the property administration of the Kremlin in 1996, then served as Putin's deputy chief of staff. He has also served as deputy prime minister.

[29] Historical oil prices can be found here: https://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart, accessed November 24, 2021.

to impeach him not once, not twice, but three times.[30] Similarly, as president, Medvedev never exercised the same degree of control over other elites or society as Putin wields. Indeed, one could argue that even in the face of the elite and societal constraints he faces, Putin may well exceed *any* of his Soviet predecessors as well in terms of the authority he wields in Russian politics today. He has ruled longer than all of them but Joseph Stalin. They faced stronger institutional constraints (with Stalin as the exception) in the form of the Communist Party (which of course ousted Nikita Khrushchev as First Secretary), but arguably fewer societal constraints than Putin since the system enabled them to wield instruments of repression more freely. Still, in emphasizing the very real limits Putin faces as a personalistic autocrat, Frye's book risks leaving the reader with the impression that he is an authoritarian without any actual authority. In reality, although Vladimir Putin does not have as free a hand in ruling Russia today as commonly depicted, he has a free-er hand than almost anyone before him, and possibly after. How weak a strongman is that really?

[30] The impeachment attempt was initiated by parliament twice in 1993 and once in 1999 See, Georgy Manaev, "How Russian Parliament Tried to Impeach President Yeltsin, Russia Beyond, Sept. 25, 2019, available at https://www.rbth.com/history/331037-how-russian-parliament-tried-to-impeach-yeltsin, accessed November 5, 2021.

Response by Timothy Frye, Columbia University

I thank Thomas Maddux for organizing such a wonderful discussion of *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's* Russia. There is no shortage of books on contemporary Russia so I appreciate the selection of my book for this roundtable. I am also grateful for his decision to invite three scholars for whom I have enormous respect to provide comments. These are busy times for all and I am thrilled that Michael Kimmage, Bryn Rosenfeld, and Kathryn Stoner managed to give the book a close read and write such thoughtful commentaries.

I am especially gratified that the reviewers view the book not just as an attempt to understand contemporary Russian politics, but also as a commentary on how we go about doing so. We have much good reporting and long-form writing on Russia that relies on the traditional tools of keen observation and deep country knowledge to produce closely drawn portraits and insightful descriptions of key events, but academic research has largely been missing from the conversation.[31] This is unfortunate as the last 20 years have seen a renaissance of research on Russia in political science.[32] *Weak Strongman* is an 'explainer book' that hopes to meet a need by translating academic research on issues from corruption and foreign policy to cyber-hacking and elections for a general-interest audience. The book aims to provide a more measured and less partisan narrative that brings greater attention to method and standards of evidence than do most popular books on Russia.

Rather than focusing on ruler personalities or historical contingency, the book borrows from recent academic research on comparative autocracy that highlights the difficult tradeoffs before autocratic rulers as they navigate threats and demands from regime insiders and the mass public.[33] My hope is that the academic research cited in the book provides a useful corrective to the overheated debates on Russian politics found in much contemporary analyses.

The relation of academia to the great American national debate on Russia is a theme that merits further attention. It would be worthwhile to explore in more depth the sources and implications of the marginalization of academic voices in public and policy discussions about Russia. For better and for worse, academics played a much greater role in these arenas during the Cold War than today. I touch on this theme briefly in the book's conclusion, but it is a topic for future research.

Weak Strongman celebrates academic research on Russia by Russian and foreign scholars, but one concern is the extent to which the kinds of research cited in the book will continue to be possible given political restrictions. In some ways, these limits are already shaping the field. The book relies heavily on Russia's remarkably good – relative to other autocracies – public-opinion research and administrative data, but other types of research are becoming much more difficult to conduct. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, scholars of Russia built a rich literature on regional politics, but we know far less today about politics at the local level as fewer scholars undertake long stays in Russia's regions.[34] Ethnographic approaches to

[31] Indeed, one could argue that the quality of long-form writing and reporting on Russia is better than on most other countries.

[32] For a brief overview, see Timothy Frye, "Russian Studies is Thriving, Not Dying," *National Interest*, October 2017, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russian-studies-thriving-not-dying-22547.

[33] Cf. Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sandcastles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[34] Among others, see Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, *Local Heroes: The Political Economy of Russian Regional Governance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, *Resisting the State: Reform and Retrenchment in Post-Soviet Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Douglass Rogers, *The Depths of Russia: Oil, Power and Culture After Socialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

studying daily life in Russia are also rarer.[35] We know less about elite politics given restrictions on access and the exceedingly narrow circle of those in the know in the Kremlin.[36] The large expatriate community in Russia working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business, and government that was a useful source of data (and gossip) in past years has largely left the country, thereby further complicating our task.

Indeed, one question raised implicitly in the book is how the political context of Russia shapes the questions we ask and the topics we may be missing. That scholars gravitate to questions best answered using survey research or administrative data may be distorting our views of Russia if this research is not balanced by other sources of data and other methods of research. In a similar vein, it is no accident that the exciting new research on Russian economic history is occurring at a time when restrictions on research on contemporary politics are increasing.[37] As the costs of researching contemporary politics increase, other topics become more attractive.

More broadly, the book reminds us that we should also be aware of how the political context influences our writing on Russia. As Kimmage points out in his review, *Weak Strongman* was written in the wake of the Trump election "when Russia was turned into an object of wild-eyed theorizing, conspiratorial paranoia and vicious political infighting" in popular accounts. As US-Russian relations continue to spiral downward, it will become even more important to recognize how the political context shapes our analyses of Russia.

One criticism of the book is that it underplays Russia's unique history and culture. Kimmage argues that the book pays insufficient attention to culture and history and in doing so presents a flattened landscape. Thomas Graham and Joseph Haberman make a similar criticism in a recent review in *Survival*.[38] I provide evidence in the book that Russia's historical legacies shape foreign policy, political attitudes, and investment patterns, but the critics are correct that I tend to emphasize the commonalities of contemporary Russian politics with other autocracies that have strikingly different historical legacies.

As a Russian language and literature major, I am sympathetic to this critique. Earlier drafts of the book featured longer discussions of Russian and Soviet history and how it does and does not impact contemporary Russia and how observers use and abuse history to make their cases. I worried that readers – especially general-interest readers - might lose the thread in such a necessarily detailed discussion and shortened this section in the final version.

The point is not that Russian history doesn't matter but that this impact must be demonstrated rather than asserted, as is often the case. To make arguments about historical legacies, observers need to do more than draw parallels between past and currents. They should typically also identify the mechanisms that allow historical legacies to produce effects through time, explain why certain legacies win out over others, refute alternative explanations, explain why some historical legacies matter

[35] Jessica Alina-Pisano, "Pokazukha, and Cardiologist Khrenov: Soviet Legacies, Legacy Theater, and a Usable Past," in *Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe,* ed. Mark R. Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[36] Works like Alena Ledeneva's *How Russia Really Works: The Informal Practices that Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) would be very difficult to write today. Even Catherine Belton's much lauded *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020) relies heavily on a small number of former Kremlin insiders many of whom have an ax to grind.

[37] For an introduction, see Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, Sergei Guriev, and Andrei Markevich, "The New Russian Economic History," December 27, 2021, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3962960 and Scott Gehlbach, "Taking Stock of Russian Economic History," https://scottgehlbach.net/taking-stock-of-russian-economic-history/ accessed January 13, 2022.

[38] Thomas Graham and Joseph Haberman, "Understanding Russia: Personalist Autocracy Versus Historical Continuity," *Survival published online September 28, 2021*, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2021.1982205.

but others do not, and account for why a legacy is reappearing at one point in time rather than another. This can certainly be done, but as Mark R. Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin point out "demonstrating the salience of historical legacies proves considerably harder than it looks."[39]

All of the reviewers in one way or another ask for more clarity about how "weak" the weak strongman of the title really is. I do not create a metric to differentiate a "weak strongman" from a "strong" strongman." The term "weak" strongman is more a literary device than an analytic one. I use the term to highlight the many constraints facing Russian President Vladimir Putin – constraints that are often underappreciated by analysts of Russia. A more accurate title might have been *Constrained Strongman*, but it does not exactly roll off the tongue.

I tried to strike a balance in discussing the effectiveness of Putin's tools. For example, in the foreign policy chapter, I argue that by dint of its nuclear weapons, military might, large economy, geographic expanse, and well-educated populace, Russia is a great power with the capacity to affect global policies from Europe to Asia, but also that its relative power is not what it was in the recent past. Looking at Russia's global position in 2022, former Soviet leader Boris Yeltsin would be ecstatic, but Communist Party head Leonid Brezhnev would be in a panic. In manipulating public opinion within Russia, Putin is more successful on issues like foreign policy where citizens are less knowledgeable than on economic issues where they can benchmark claims by the government. In managing the economy Putin uses corruption to reward regime insiders, but not so much that the economy tanks and sparks protest. He retains considerable power, especially the power to repress – Putin is a strongman after all - but also faces constraints in how he exercises this power that are often underestimated or misunderstood.

The comparative approach in the book highlights how Putin's tools for legitimating his power have changed over time. In his first decade in power Putin could point to massive economic growth, and in his second, he could point to the annexation of Crimea, but as these tools have become less effective, he has had to rely more heavily on repression. This variation over time underlies why the framework adopted here is helpful. Even while Putin's worldview and Russia's historical legacies have remained more or less constant, his policies have changed in response to economic shocks and international events.

The goal of the book is to generate discussion about Russian politics, but also to reassess how we study and talk about Russia in our discussions of public policy. Rather than provide definitive answers, the book hoped to raise questions about Russia-watching and about how academics can contribute to public debates. What types of evidence are useful? What are the limits of our knowledge? Should academic research shape public debates? If so, how? It is gratifying to see these discussions taking place in the thoughtful comments of the reviewers.

[39] Mark R. Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin, "Introduction," *Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe,* ed. Mark R. Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).