

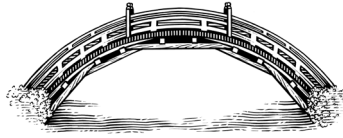
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Timothy Frye's

Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia

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How Does the Weak Strongman Stay in Power? Exposing the Roots of Vladimir Putin's Rule in Russia

Aleksandar Matovski

Conventional wisdom holds that populations support autocrats only because they are coerced, bribed, or brainwashed into obedience. Driven by this perception, much of the public discourse and analysis of contemporary dictatorships ignores the role of societies in the rise and operation of these regimes. Similarly, many of the checks on authoritarian power are downplayed. Elections are assumed to be so reliably manipulated, protest and opposition so effectively quashed, and all other institutions and elites so thoroughly co-opted that they do not meaningfully shape politics in these countries.

Unsurprisingly, most of the ink is spilled on the seemingly all-powerful puppet masters. Dictators' personalities, obsessions, and purported worldviews are obsessively scrutinized as the ultimate resource on politics in these regimes. These accounts of court intrigue and leadership produce gripping narratives. But their pervasiveness creates an illusion that autocrats operate with very few constraints. They also make us lose sight of the fact that dictators are products of the circumstances in which they rule at least as much as they create them.

Timothy Frye's *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* is thus an exceptionally timely and prescient treatise, addressing these pathologies in the study of one of the most consequential present-day dictatorships: Russia under Vladimir Putin. *Weak Strongman* is not based on new research by the author; instead, the book is an exceedingly rare species: an effort to distill the cumulative wisdom of political science research on the Russian and other autocracies, and in a way that makes it widely accessible beyond narrow scholarly circles.

The book's core mission—and achievement—is to bridge the gap between the scholarship on Putinism and similar regimes and how these are understood in policy circles and by the public. In this sense, *Weak Strongman* tries to reverse a frustrating trend. Over the two decades of

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NOTE: The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not represent the policies of the U.S. Navy, U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

Putin's rule, academic research on Russian politics has advanced by leaps and bounds to become more nuanced, sophisticated, and grounded in "hard" empirical evidence than ever before. But at the same time, it has become more and more disconnected from policymaking and the public discourse on Russia, which have often been dominated by superficial analysis and political polarization.

Frye centers *Weak Strongman* on the two most important misconceptions that have emerged in this context. The first is that Vladimir Putin is the be-all and end-all of Russian politics, that Russia's autocracy is a reflection of his will, and everything important that happens in Russia is part of his design. The second is that Putin's rule is an exceptional, inimitable product of Russia's circumstances and its predisposition toward authoritarianism.

Weak Strongman demonstrates that the opposite is true on both accounts. Putinism is a far weaker (as the book's title implies) and more circumscribed dictatorship than is generally assumed. And for the most part, it is also a fairly typical sort of autocracy. Frye combines insights from the study of Russian and comparative politics to show that Putin rose to power in the same way as other strongmen—not as part of any unique or grand design but by taking advantage of his country's dysfunction and the weakness of the alternatives. And his rule has been fraught with many of the same limitations and metastasizing pathologies as any "standard-issue" personalist dictatorship.

Putinism, in Frye's rendering, is a fragile balancing act in which the strongman must rely on elite networks that play by their own rules and could ultimately depose him. Putin must tolerate the systemic corruption that keeps these self-serving elites in check but also ruins the economy and increases the odds of a popular rebellion. Repression, propaganda, and electoral fraud are blunt tools for controlling Russia's opposition, and their use may backfire amid rising popular discontent. Putin's assertive foreign policy has become an increasingly counterproductive strategy to bolster the regime's legitimacy. And sitting on top of this decaying structure, the aging strongman cannot safely retire, making leadership succession a potentially fatal flaw of Russia's autocracy.

But how has this house of cards held together for so long? As Frye suggests, the most overlooked and crucial pillar that has sustained Putinism has been the popularity of its leader. This is the most important insight of *Weak Strongman*, challenging conventional understandings of Russia's autocracy. Frye taps into a growing body of empirical research that shows

that the level of Putin’s popular approval—which has hovered between 60% to 80% throughout most of his reign—has been largely genuine and essential for keeping the various centrifugal forces of his regime in check. The unprecedented popularity Putin enjoyed during his first terms in office empowered him to crush any resistance, subdue independent institutions, and expand his formal power. Popularity has allowed him to effectively police the widely despised Russian elite, as no oligarch, politician, or bureaucrat could hope to challenge a leader adored by the public. As long as Putin remained popular, he could effectively shield the utterly corrupt Russian autocracy from mass rebellion. The many critical flaws and contradictions of Putinism have, paradoxically, been offset by the dictator’s mass appeal.

If there is a flaw in *Weak Strongman*, it lies in not pushing this crucial insight further. Instead, Frye seems to back away from his more substantive discussion of the attitudinal roots of Putinism to provide a simpler explanation that Russians have supported Putin for “ordinary” reasons: relatively high economic performance and the perceived policy successes under his reign. But neither of these factors appear to have worked in simple and ordinary ways. Putin’s approval ratings effectively decoupled from perceptions of Russia’s economy as early as 2010,¹ so the standard economic voting logic only explains the mass appeal of early Putinism. And the “policy successes” that have drawn Russians to Putin more recently have been anything but ordinary. As Frye himself suggests (citing empirical research by authors like Greene and Robertson),² these were high-stakes stunts like the annexation of Crimea, which tapped into the quite distinct “emotional attachments to Russia’s role as a great power” and deep-seated resentments about the loss of empire and international status (p. 59).

Garden-variety economic- or policy-based voting cannot do full justice to these mass attitudes. Instead, the core sentiments that have sustained Putinism seem to have been grounded in the extraordinary traumas that followed the Soviet collapse,³ and Russia’s national identity politics that emerged as result.⁴ Exploring these mass outlooks would have been in

¹ Daniel Treisman, “Putin’s Popularity since 2010: Why Did Support for the Kremlin Plunge, Then Stabilize?” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30, no. 5 (2014): 370–88.


² Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson, *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

³ Aleksandar Matovski, *Popular Dictatorships: Crises, Mass Opinion, and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), chap. 5.

⁴ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin’s Leadership and Russia’s Insecure Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

line with the general thrust of the framework in *Weak Strongman*. They were also shared with other regimes built on post-imperial complexes—in places such as Weimar Germany⁵ and Turkey⁶—supporting the book's thesis that Putinism is not exceptional but is built on foundations similar to other autocracies.

Still, these are not sins of omission but of emphasis and nuancing. And the book's other qualities compensate for its flaws. Chief among these virtues is the ability to capture some of the key underlying trends that have manifested with Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Unlike analyses attributing Russia's aggressive foreign policy to NATO expansion or Putin's anti-Western worldviews, Frye points to the need for great-power posturing to compensate for the sagging domestic legitimacy of Putinism and the seeking of foreign enemies to justify internal repression. Similarly, one would be much better able to anticipate the abysmal performance of Russia's military by reading *Weak Strongman*, with its emphasis on the frailty, corruption, and decay of Putin's rule, than by scouring through the pre-invasion military analyses and forecasts.

This relevance adds on to the book's merits, particularly the author's ability to draw on an impressive range of research, accumulated over twenty years, to put together a well-rounded and sorely needed account of Putinism—one that is accessible to the wider public without losing scholarly rigor. In in doing so, Frye manages to bust many of the myths, misconceptions, and misplaced mystique surrounding Vladimir Putin's rule in Russia. 

⁵ See, for example, Stephen E. Hanson, *Post-Imperial Democracies: Ideology and Party Formation in Third Republic France, Weimar Germany, and Post-Soviet Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁶ See, for example, Soner Cagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey* (London: IB Tauris, 2017).

Understanding the Enigma of Putin's Russia

Christopher Miller

Several months into the latest phase of the Russia-Ukraine War, it may seem like a strange time to refer to Russian president Vladimir Putin or his system of governance as “weak.” It certainly does not feel that way on the frontlines of Donbas as Russia brings to bear all its conventional might in a war of conquest, the type of conflict many analysts thought had gone out of fashion in Europe after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. If you had asked Russia watchers in the summer of 2021 about the likelihood of over 100,000 Russian soldiers marching into Ukraine, most would have seen the scenario as far-fetched. The entire field of Russian studies deserves tough questions about the adequacy of its methods for understanding Russian politics.

If anyone has a credible claim to understand and explain Russian politics, though, it is Timothy Frye, who is arguably the leading figure in a new school of political science research that seeks to elucidate the inner logics of the Russian political system. Alongside numerous coauthors and former students, Frye’s research has examined topics such as the significance of Russian elections, public opinion, lobbying and corruption, and property rights and the rule of law. *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin’s Russia* is Frye’s brilliant distillation of nearly 30 years of research on these themes.

Despite this new wave of research about how Russia’s political system works, as Frye notes, there is a long history of relying on tropes rather than analysis in the field of Russian studies. It isn’t only Westerners like Churchill who have seen Russia as a land of riddles and enigmas; Russians’ analyses of their own country’s politics frequently rely on references to the country’s supposedly unique history, culture, or spirituality.

Frye asks his readers to situate contemporary Russia not in the context of Ivan the Terrible or Leo Tolstoy but in that of other contemporary authoritarian states, ranging from Recep Erdogan’s Turkey to Viktor Orban’s Hungary to Nicolás Maduro’s Venezuela. As *Weak Strongman* shows, not everything about Russia is enigmatic. And despite his strongman image, Putin has an ability to control the Russian political system and state apparatus that is more circumscribed than it often appears.

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Weak Strongman brings to bear two decades of evidence to prove this point, but I was struck by the book's ability to explain an event that occurred after its 2021 publication: Russia's bungled and poorly organized attack on Ukraine.

By launching a massive invasion of Ukraine to the surprise of many of his fellow elites, Putin demonstrated that he is a strongman. However, the war also shows the weakness of Putin's rule when it comes to mobilizing state and society. The most obvious example is Russia's decision thus far not to announce a general military mobilization, evidently from fear that it would be too unpopular or domestically costly.

The "weak strongman" dynamic is also visible in the major inadequacies in Russian planning and logistics. Any strongman can start a war, but it takes a capable and well-governed bureaucracy to manage logistics efficiently. The Kremlin's difficulties in equipping its army—and even in getting the military to follow orders—is evidence of a weak state, not a strong one. That so many generals have had to spend time on the front lines sorting out problems, with many being killed in the process, suggests that the brittleness of Russia's bureaucratic capacity extends even into the military, an organization that ought to be good at issuing orders and seeing them followed. Front-line crisis management by Russian generals is the military version of the system of *ruchnoe upravlenie* ("manual control") that defines much of Putin's system. Everything must be managed directly from the top because Putin has found no way of making lower-level officials follow orders reliably.

Frye's rational, logical, empirical, measured interpretation in the book helps to explain many of the ostensible riddles and enigmas that have puzzled so many observers. When it comes to foreign policy, however, Frye notes that Russia differs in important aspects from the other autocracies, like Orban's Hungary or Erdogan's Turkey, that he uses as frequent reference points. Yet even in foreign policy, Frye emphasizes the extent to which bread and butter concerns predominate at the popular level. He notes that Russians have repeatedly told pollsters that they would prefer high living standards to being "a great power which other countries respect and fear" (p. 168). Public opinion surveys also suggest (or at least they used to) that acquiring Ukraine is not a public priority, with Frye citing a January 2020 Levada poll that found that only 15% of Russians believe "Russia and Ukraine must unite into one country" (p. 169).

However, just a year later, when Putin penned the article "On the Historical Unity of the Russians and Ukrainians," there was hardly any

public backlash or opposition.¹ Nor has there been much public opposition to the “special military operation” launched on February 24, 2022. The urge to attack Ukraine, the ease with which the elite tolerated it, and the broad acceptance of the popular mobilization for the war symbolized in Russia with the letter “Z” can only be partially explained by the political logics of a strong man and a weak state.

In my view, in an admirable search for the logic of Russian politics, the entire field of Russian studies has devoted insufficient attention to the nonrational urges—for status, for recognition, for dominance—that lie at the core of so many political struggles. At one point, for example, Frye explains the post-Crimea jump in Putin’s popularity by noting that it was a “policy success” (p. 62). In hindsight, the interesting conclusion is not that Russian public opinion responded positively to a “success,” but that the Russian public saw the seizure of Crimea as a success. If Denmark’s prime minister quietly marched her army into Schleswig-Holstein, she would not get a comparable bump in the polls; most Danes would be horrified. Even among comparatively bellicose Americans, who regularly find themselves involved in foreign wars, annexing Mexican or Canadian territory has been a niche viewpoint since the 1840s. Russians’ broad support for territorial conquest in Ukraine deserves more attention than scholars have given it.

Except for a small number of scholars focused on Russia’s nationalist right-wing, the field of Russian studies (myself included) underestimated the role of imperial, great-power nationalist sentiment in driving Russian politics and public opinion. When politicians like Yuri Luzhkov banged on about Crimea being Russian, we wrote it off as domestic posturing. When Crimea was annexed, we sought to treat it as a one-off. And when Vladimir Zhirinovskiy threatened to seize parts of Kazakhstan, we explained him away as a “clownish provocateur,” as the *New York Times* described him in his obituary this April.² Yet amid the “Z” mobilization, one could just as well argue he was a prophet. As we try to understand the future of this newly radicalized polity, we will need to explore how this apparently deep-set nationalism interacts with the wobbly state apparatus and political structure that *Weak Strongman* so ably describes. ♦

¹ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” President of Russia website, July 12, 2021 ~ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

² Neil MacFarquhar, Anton Troianovski, and Ivan Nechepurenko, “Vladimir V. Zhirinovskiy Dies at 75; Ultranationalist Russian Politician,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2022 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/06/world/europe/vladimir-zhirinovskiy-dead.html>.

An Autocrat's Dilemmas: Putin's Power and Its Limits

Andrew Monaghan

Timothy Frye begins his fine book, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*, with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the question of whether the United States should have militarily intervened in 2014. The book is intended to "improve our public conversation" about Russia (p. vii). His argument is that Russia is a personalist autocracy and an "opportunistic power that uses its military and economic might to influence weaker countries in its neighborhood while picking its spots against more powerful rivals like the European Union, United States, and China" (p. 200). Even so, Frye (correctly, in my view) both highlights the significant limits to Putin's power and also suggests that "Russia's next few years will likely be rocky" because of "deep economic crisis" and public fatigue with Putin (p. 200).

This analysis sounds like a view written in spring 2022, but Frye wrote his book well before Moscow's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February. The ongoing relevance of his intention to improve our public conversation is being proved as the West debates Putin's rationality, the desirability and nature of a military intervention in the war, and even the possibility of an escalation to World War III and the use of nuclear weapons. The great-power competition that became part of policy and public discussion in the West in the mid-to-late 2010s is now very real. Informed public conversation could hardly be more timely or important.

To enhance public understanding of Russia, Frye seeks to answer the main questions that have dominated Western debate about Russia since the mid-2000s. Book chapters cover Putin's popularity; the role of elections, repression, and media manipulation; fluctuations in Russia's economy; and Moscow's great-power posturing and assertive foreign policy, including in the cyber realm. Thus, Frye aims to show how Russia "actually" works and how it does not, what Russian politics is and what it is not. Helpfully, he also compares Russia with other autocracies to place it into the wider context.

Frye's analysis to demonstrate how Putin is a "weak strongman" is admirably concise, well-organized, and accessible. The most valuable insights are in how Frye takes us beyond "Putinology," reflecting instead on

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the broader forces at work in Russia. The tendency to link Russia's various ills to Putin, Frye argues, implies that when he leaves office, so will these pathologies. Yet Frye's analysis suggests that Russia "most likely" will remain a nondemocracy after Putin (p. 201). According to Frye, only 16% of personalist autocracies are replaced by democracies (p. 201), and any new Russian leadership will have to face many of the same trade-offs that have dominated the policy discussions of Putin's administration.

The comparative discussion of personalist autocracies is a useful addition to a debate that Frye argues too heavily fixates on Putin himself or assessments of Russia's exceptional historical legacy, approaches that all too often lead to simplistic assumptions about governing Russia and shortcuts about the recurring nature of historical patterns. For Frye, examining the type of government Russia embodies and how that shapes its politics shifts the conversation from psychoanalyzing Putin to the "stuff of politics" (p. 48). This approach allows for comparison with other personalist autocracies, where Frye does not find Russia to be exceptional: Frye argues that compared to other rulers in the region, Putin's time in office is "par for the course" (p. 23). This approach facilitates the examination of the limits and costs, and even the precarious nature, of personalist autocratic rule—questions that often feature in recent news headlines. Notably, Frye notes that failed personalist autocrats rarely have a soft landing: between 1946 and 2008, 70% of personalist autocrats lost office through coups, protests, and revolts, and 80% of these "ended up in jail, in exile, or dead" (p. 43).

Frye also compares Russia's regime with other forms of government, such as a military dictatorship or a one-party system. He examines system-wide factors in Russia, including the weakness of its political institutions, the mistrust and uncertainty that impinge on its politics and economic development, and Putin's need to seek trade-offs between satisfying his inner circle while also pleasing the wider public. Thus, Frye reflects on how Putin's team has successfully co-opted the elites and sought to channel and deflect public protest. In these ways, the book's analysis makes a contribution to a wider, more general public conversation.

The book will stimulate debate among social science specialists and Russia hands. For instance, Frye examines the nature of an economy under an autocratic regime, and reminds his readers that Russia is not the "economic basket case" many think it to be, even if its economy is driven by commodity prices rather than sound policy or innovation. But he might have made more of purchasing power parity as a means of measuring

economic strength. He does mention it briefly in passing, but it is a useful tool to understand the scale and value of state spending, such as on defense. Neither does Frye reflect in depth on the impact of, and Moscow's response to, Western sanctions imposed since 2014, including import substitution or Russia's emergence as a leading grain exporter. Russia's central role in the global grain market has become very evident as a result of the protracted war with Ukraine.

The discussion of Russia's foreign policy also raises many good points about Moscow's more assertive foreign policy and the trade-offs made between security and economic development and growth. Even so, gaps and questions remain. The Russian leadership's long-standing concerns about a "color revolution" have been a dominant feature of the security debate in Moscow and surely relate to the direction of its personalist autocracy. Moreover, Moscow's understanding of the evolving international affairs landscape is missing from the book: how it envisages a "post-West" world, including a "Pacific 21st century"; its prioritization of the Arctic; its concerns about growing competition over the global commons; and the geoeconomic competition that Moscow sees as intensifying and driving conflict through the coming decade. This all raises the question: given that the Kremlin has a strategic agenda and is investing significant resources in attempting to implement it, is Moscow really merely "opportunistic" or "reactive"?

Finally, given the unfolding tragedy of the renewed fighting in Ukraine, the central questions about Russia are evolving. Putin's popularity has come into question, as has his use of repression, and the current situation has again stoked debates as to the threat of a coup against his regime. But two other long-running questions have also come to the fore. The first is close to the heart of this book: how to best describe the Russian leadership? Frye makes a case for personalist autocracy, but for years some have advocated that Russia is not merely autocratic, but a dictatorship or a police state. Whether or not Russia is fascist is another extended debate,¹ once again given fresh emphasis by Moscow's asserted aim to "de-Nazify" Ukraine. It would be interesting to know whether Frye would now modify his argument about Putin as a personalist autocrat in these new conditions.

Another question is largely absent from the book but nevertheless now unavoidable in discussing Russia—what is Russia's calculus behind its measures of war and the role of the military? Since Russia's annexation of

¹ See, for instance, Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (London: Cornell University Press, 2021).

Crimea in 2014, a dominant narrative in the West is Moscow's development of a "new" approach to war, one that emphasizes nonmilitary means and measures short of war, including disinformation, cyberattacks, election interference, and the use of proxies, among others. And Frye rightly engages with this, including in a chapter dedicated to Moscow's hacking and digital interference. Nevertheless, his book does not examine what war actually means to Moscow, including its measures of war and evolving military strategy, despite Moscow's very visible modernization of its armed forces since 2010 along with their deployments in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015 and Syria since 2015. Indeed, with much discussion about a "21st-century blitzkrieg," Russia's military leadership continued to emphasize the role of militaries and warfighting in international affairs through the 2010s.

As a consequence of Moscow's attempted blitzkrieg in February 2022, the next few years look to be rocky indeed for Russia and also for Russian relations with the Euro-Atlantic community. With Russia set squarely among the most important international questions in the public, political, and academic eye, Frye's book deserves to be a reference point. ♦

How Can Putin's Russia Be Best Understood?

Mark N. Katz

In *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*, Timothy Frye presents a strong case for how Russia's current politics and policies cannot be fully understood as simply "a reflection either of Vladimir Putin's worldview or Russia's unique history and culture" (pp. vii–viii). Instead, Russia can—and should—be understood with reference to the growing social science literature on nondemocracies to see how Putin's Russia is similar to or different from other autocratic regimes.

Frye finds that Putin's Russia is more similar to other personalist autocracies than to autocracies ruled by organizations such as the military or a ruling party. Frye is quite persuasive in making his argument, showing in successive chapters how Putin's ability to maintain popularity, manipulate domestic elections, manage the economy, use repression, and control domestic media are all similar to what other personalist autocratic leaders have done (and continue to do) in other countries. What Frye shows so well is that Putin is not unique but can be better understood through comparison with other personalist autocrats. Indeed, the challenge for this reviewer is to try to find arguments about how to understand Putin's Russia that the author did not consider (but might respond to in his reply to this essay).

One is that while Putin's Russia is not a military or party dictatorship, it may be more similar to a theocratic regime such as the Islamic Republic of Iran than a personalist regime. For instance, Putin's and the Moscow patriarchy's conflation of Russian Orthodoxy with Russian great-power nationalism is similar to the way in which first Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and then Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have conflated their interpretation of Shiism with Iran's own great-power nationalism. In addition, the National Guard created under Putin in 2016 plays a similar role to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) in preserving not just the regime but its ideology. It might be argued that the National Guard is far more powerful in Russia than the Moscow Patriarchy. Scholars studying Iran, however, see the IRGC as having become stronger vis-à-vis the Shiite clergy. The increasingly dominant role the IRGC is playing in

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Iranian politics raises the possibility that the National Guard may follow a similar path in Russia.

Another possible comparison is Russia's trajectory as a great power compared to that of other great powers. Russia has experienced many setbacks in its long history (including the "Time of Troubles," the Napoleonic invasion, the Crimean War, World War I, the Nazi invasion, and the collapse of the Soviet Union), but it has managed to rebound after each one. Russia is not alone in this; other great powers have also experienced rebounds after setbacks (including the British Empire after the American Revolution and Napoleonic Wars; France after the Napoleonic Wars; Germany after World War I; and the United States after the Civil War and the Vietnam War). But sometimes great powers experience setbacks severe enough to end their great-power status (such as Spain after the loss of its Western Hemisphere colonies, and Germany, Japan, France, and Britain after World War II). If Russia continues to do badly in its current war against Ukraine, will it be able to bounce back or will this experience irrevocably diminish its ability to act like a great power at a time when other powers are rising? Comparisons with other cases would be useful.

Frye does note, however, that, "with its size, nuclear weapons, and legacy as a superpower, Russia is an unusual autocracy in foreign affairs" (p. 37). Russia's large nuclear arsenal suggests that it will remain a great power—or does it? Moscow's possession of this arsenal did not prevent the Soviet Union from collapsing in 1991 and is not preventing Russia from performing so poorly in its war against Ukraine now.

Assuming that Russia does remain a great power, comparing Russia to other personalist autocracies may not be so useful in terms of understanding Putin's foreign policy as it is for Russian domestic policies. It does seem useful, though, to compare Russia to another authoritarian great power: China. For over three decades after the death of Mao Zedong, Beijing focused on building up its economic strength before asserting itself as a great power under Xi Jinping, whereas Putin has been impatient to reassert Russia as a great power despite not having built up its economy. Is this due simply to Russia being ruled by a personalist autocracy while China has been under one-party rule (though one that appears more like a personalist autocracy under Xi Jinping)? Or do we indeed have to go back to comparing the worldview of Putin and his Chinese counterparts and the unique histories and cultures of Russia and China to find answers to this question?

Finally, it may be necessary to combine a study of Putin's worldview, the uniqueness of Russian history, and comparisons with other personalist autocracies to address some questions—such as how Putin, on the one hand, and personalist autocrats in different countries, on the other, relate to Western democracies. One feature of Russia having had so much personalist autocratic rule is that its various autocrats have differed from one another. Their differences may have been due in part to the situations they inherited and had to manage (in other words, the policy that was pursued at any given time was one that any Russian leader would have pursued under similar circumstances). But this seems unlikely, and that each autocrat's personal worldview—and assessment of a predecessor's flaws—affects his or her desire to pursue different policies. It is interesting to note how often this has occurred in Russian history since the mid-nineteenth century:

- The reformist Alexander II pursued very different policies from his archconservative predecessor, Nicholas I
- The conservative Alexander III swung Russia back toward authoritarianism.
- Lenin largely destroyed the tsarist system presided over by Nicholas II.
- Stalin ended Lenin's New Economic Policy and replaced it with central planning and collectivization.
- Khrushchev repudiated Stalin's harsh policies and attempted reform.
- Brezhnev rejected Khrushchev's reforms and presided over a conservative autocratic regime.
- Gorbachev repudiated Brezhnev's conservatism and attempted political and economic reform.
- Yeltsin denounced Gorbachev's efforts as too timid and pushed for a more rapid political and economic transformation.
- Putin ended Yeltsin's reform efforts and restored authoritarian rule.

One way we knew that Putin was not really being replaced during Dmitry Medvedev's 2008–12 term as president was that Medvedev did not bring about much change. All this raises not just the possibility but even the likelihood that whoever succeeds Putin will repudiate many of his policies and pursue very different ones—even if he (as is most likely) is also an autocrat. Exactly which of Putin's policies will be changed and which will remain, of course, cannot be foretold. Comparative analysis of what

happens when one personalist autocrat replaces another in other countries might help shed some light on this.

In sum, Frye has written an excellent book. He has shown that applying social science methods and comparing Russia with other nondemocracies can result in very useful insights into contemporary Russia. Hopefully, his book will inspire more such studies. ◆

Author's Response: A Russian Reckoning?

Timothy Frye

The only thing better than reading a smart review of your book is to read four smart reviews, as is the case with this *Asia Policy* book review roundtable. I thank Aleksandar Matovski, Christopher Miller, Andrew Monaghan, and Mark Katz for their close readings of *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*. They not only provide many useful insights but also raise important questions that can help set a research agenda for studying Russia going forward.

All book reviews are written in the shadow of current events, and few events have recently loomed larger than Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I was pleased to see that the reviewers found the book's emphasis on Russia's institutional pathologies to be a useful framework for understanding the invasion in all its senselessness. I address some of these issues in more detail in a new foreword to the paperback version that will appear in September.

I was also pleased to see the broad acceptance of the main arguments of the book, such as the benefits of looking beyond Putin, the importance of a comparative perspective, and the value of social science research for comprehending Russian politics. Rather than dwell on the points of agreement, though, this essay will focus on the reviewers' calls to give greater attention to particular issues. I am sympathetic to this call for more detail. In writing a book aimed at the intersection of specialist and general interest readers, I recognized the trade-off in achieving the depth necessary to persuade the specialist reader while not straining the patience of the general interest reader. This made for some uncomfortable choices and hard cuts.

Matovski and Miller applaud the book's emphasis on the importance of public opinion for Putin's regime but each would like to push the argument in slightly different directions. Matovski calls for a deeper probe into Russia's national identity politics and makes the very helpful suggestion of comparing Russia to other post-imperial countries like Weimar Germany and Turkey, to which one might add Britain and France as well. Miller makes a similar insight by noting that "we will need to explore how this

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apparently deep-set nationalism interacts with the wobbly state apparatus and political structure” to understand Russian politics.

This critique to pay greater attention to nationalism has much going for it. In trying to downplay the “magical” qualities often attributed to Vladimir Putin’s popularity, such as his publicity stunts, personal charisma, and Russians’ supposed support for strong leaders, I urged observers to look at the more mundane factors that are often critical to a leader’s popularity but often discounted in general discussions of Russian politics. I argue that performance matters for the popularity of leaders like Putin—not just information or propaganda about performance, but actual performance. It matters for Putin’s support that living standards in Russia soared, that Russia annexed Crimea without bloodshed, and that pensions have been paid on time. Green and Robertson find that even controlling for personality traits, respondents whose economic situation improved in the last year were more likely to vote for and approve of Putin.¹

But Matovski and Miller are surely right that we need a better understanding of the causes and consequences of nationalism and national identity. Recent works have made some progress. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova uses social identity theory to argue that Putin has exploited the trauma of the 1990s.² Green and Robertson point to the intense emotional appeals that bolstered Putin after the annexation of Crimea.³ Matovski’s own work on Putin’s exploitation of crises and fears of political instability fills an important need.⁴

These are all important contributions, but this is hard work. Nations have multiple identities that change over time. One person’s historic trauma is another person’s historic opportunity. National identities are not given in nature but are contested political creations. Identities and interests interact in ways that are difficult for observers to capture. Understanding why and when appeals to identity strike home is not easy. After the anti-government demonstrations of 2011, Putin banged the anti-Western drum for two years, but only the 2014 annexation of Crimea rallied Russians to support him. Moreover, the link between national identity and policy choices is far

¹ Samuel Green and Graeme Robertson, “Agreeable Authoritarians: Personalist and Politics in Putin’s Russia,” *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 13 (2017): 1819.

² Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *Red Mirror: Putin’s Leadership and Russia’s Insecure Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³ Samuel A. Green and Graeme B. Robertson, *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁴ Aleksandar Matovski, *Popular Dictatorships: Crises, Mass Opinion and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

from clear. As I note in the preface to the paperback version, Putin could have brought Russia back as a great power in many ways, but, in the end, he chose to do so in perhaps the costliest way possible: repression at home and aggression abroad.

Miller notes a related issue of pressing importance: “Russians’ broad support for territorial conquest in Ukraine deserves more attention than have scholars have given it,” adding that in the United States and Europe the popularity of territorial annexation is hard to imagine. This is a great insight, and understanding the emergence of the norm against territorial expansion is a worthy topic of research. The popularity of territorial expansion may be easier to imagine outside of democracies. A Chinese takeover of Taiwan or Indian takeover over disputed territory in Kashmir might prove a counterpoint with support in their domestic populations.

Miller’s comment, though, raises the critical issue of popular support for the war. Early reports suggest majorities are solidly in favor, but the results are hard to interpret, even setting aside social desirability bias. Simple yes and no answers to survey questions about the war are rather crude indicators of attitudes that are likely subtle, volatile, and contingent on events and question wording. Moreover, opposition to the war may be expressed in simple grumbling, passive resistance, withdrawal from politics, or other ways that are not easy to capture. More broadly, opposition to the war need not lead to opposition to Putin and the regime.

Looking at the few cases where data is available, public support for war tends to surge with the first shot and decay over time, and looking forward, we will need to understand this decay rate while also separating typical rally around the flag sentiments from those rooted in Russia’s great-power nationalism. Whether we will be able to capture this sentiment will be a challenge. In another project, my co-authors and I have repeated our studies of popular support for Putin conducted in 2015 and 2016 and have not been able to replicate the results for reasons we do not yet understand well.⁵

It is safe to say, though, that the invasion of Ukraine was not a war driven by popular demand. Prior to the invasion, it was hard to find a majority in Russia that even supported recognizing Luhansk and Donetsk, let alone sending Russian troops to Ukraine. Miller makes the useful point

⁵ Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter, “Is Putin’s Popularity (Still) Real: A Cautionary Note on Using List Experiments to Measure Popularity in Authoritarian Regimes,” PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo, no. 773, May 3, 2022 ~ <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/is-putins-popularity-still-real-a-cautionary-note-on-using-list-experiments-to-measure-popularity-in-authoritarian-regimes>.

that Russians did not object to Putin's "historical" writings suggesting that Russians and Ukrainians were one people. But flipping this line of argument may be more productive. Had Putin not invaded Ukraine, it is hard to imagine that he would have paid any costs at home. Political science is only beginning to understand the emotional and ideational bases for popular support for autocracies, and Matovski's and Miller's comments point us in a useful direction.

Monaghan too accepts the broad premises of the book's argument but also calls for a more detailed discussion of foreign policy and the meaning of war for the Kremlin. I agree. The foreign policy chapter was by far the most difficult to write. Covering the great range of issues in a single chapter made for hard choices, and Russia's scale, military might, and history make it an unusual autocracy in foreign affairs. In addition, while my argument encourages readers to look beyond Putin to understand Russian politics, leaders in all political systems matter more in foreign policy. Finally, without disrespecting my colleagues, the breadth of academic research on Russian foreign policy is thinner than on domestic politics.

One goal of the foreign policy chapter was to "rightsize" evaluations of the Russian threat by reminding readers of Russia's assets as a great power while also recognizing the difficult trade-offs that come with an assertive foreign policy. Monaghan is certainly correct that the book could have explored in greater detail how Moscow understands war and the role of the military.

In keeping in line with *Weak Strongman's* argument, I might note that the meaning of war might depend on where one sits. For Russia's quasi-private security providers and the defense industry, it is a source of booty. For economic elites engaged in foreign trade, it is unwelcome. In relation to Ukraine, one might distinguish between Putin who appears strongly motivated by "the Ukrainian question," and other elites—even many *siloviki* (security elites)—who, while supportive of the hard line toward the West and Ukraine, have not expressed Putin's enthusiasm that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" who need to be united under a single government. In addition, the meaning of war is also likely to be driven by outcomes on the ground in Ukraine. That Russian forces failed to take Kyiv in a week as the Kremlin planned will surely shape future discussions of Russian military strategy. How different stakeholders in Russia view war and the role of the military will merit greater attention.

Finally, Katz and Monaghan applaud the comparative framework in *Weak Strongman* but ask whether other comparisons might shed light on different aspects of Russian politics. While I focus on personalist

autocracies, like Erdogan's Turkey, and Chavez's Venezuela, Katz makes intriguing comparisons to the Islamic Republic of Iran and asks whether a theocracy frame would help understand Russian politics. I'm far from an expert on Iran but would like to explore this further. To be sure, the Russian Orthodox Church has gained greater symbolic prominence in recent years but has very limited autonomy, and the content of religious doctrine has more impact on politics in Tehran (and in Washington, for that matter) than in Moscow. Yet, personalist autocracies frequently emphasize traditional social and family values in ways that reflect the sensibilities of the major religions, while depicting their political enemies as apostates and traitors.

Katz also points to the intriguing possibility of comparing Putin's Russia to other historical great powers, including imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Scholars have debated for years whether Russia is a rising or declining power but have focused somewhat narrowly on capabilities and less on the consequences of Russian power for its policies. Moreover, Katz rightly points out that while imperial Russia and the Soviet Union bounced back from numerous setbacks, not all great powers endure. Sometimes military challenges force reckonings that reassess national identities and sometimes they don't. I'm far from the first to argue that Russia's weak economic reach exceeds its military grasp and that a less assertive Kremlin will arise only after Russia comes to grips with this reality. What Russia's less-than-stellar performance in Ukraine to date and "the rise of the rest" means for how Russians view their role in the world is not just a topic ripe for research but perhaps the most important substantive issue facing Russia.

Matovski well captures the motivating force behind *Weak Strongman*: a desire to use the great social science research produced over the past two decades to enrich a national debate on Russia that is too often mired in outdated stereotypes and superficial evidence. That the reviewers engaged so deeply with the book is a hopeful sign of progress on this front. The depth of my responses to the reviewers only leads me to thank them once again. They have pointed to many areas worthy of research. Now it is time to get to work. 