

Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia. By Timothy Frye. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). vii, 269 pp. Notes. Index. Figures. \$24.95, hard bound.

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Timothy Frye is on a public education mission to educate American citizens about Russia's politics. This is a laudable goal and the work achieves its purpose. Frye categorizes Russia as an autocracy and thus part of a larger category of illiberal states, and applies the relevant methodology to understand how the system was formed and how it works. As befits a public education program, the work eschews technical jargon and obfuscating language, and instead is aimed directly at the reader eager to learn about the mysteries and mechanisms of a strange and paradoxical political order.

At the center of the study is the towering personality of Vladimir Putin. Written before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Frye could not know that the figure at the center of his work would so spectacularly crash and burn his way into the history books. Instead, Frye examines Putin's leadership in the comparative framework of the constraints that limit the power of the autocrat: the bluntness of the tools used to manage the country, the complex trade-offs in domestic and foreign policy, and the intense uncertainty generated by weak state institutions.

Although Putin towered as a Colossus over Russian politics for over two decades, he presided over a system that could not generate sustained economic growth or even an enduring model of political stability. A rampant bureaucracy and security apparatus controlled everything and stunted effective governance. The system devised policies that served the needs of the regime and not the broader interests of the state, let alone its citizens, which the administration ostensibly served. Enough was delivered in terms of standards of living and political stability to gain enduring popularity, but the system had instability built into its very heart.

This paradox of autocratic leadership is at the heart of the study, examining the gulf between the ostensible enormity of the powers vested in Putin's presidential leadership and the dysfunctionality characteristic in the three areas of the economy, polity, and policy. All this rendered Putin a "weak strongman." Policy was generated through bargaining within the system, and although expertise and technocracy was at the heart of Putin-style managerialism, the need to address the needs of privileged players within the system often generated dysfunctional outcomes.

The work is based on an impressive amount of original research, including public opinion polls, interviews, examination of the social media, electoral data, and the corrupt practices associated with balloting, even tracking graffiti to gauge public sentiments, and institutional analysis of how Kremlin politics actually works. Like a fine wine, this study is the product of a lifetime's work, and it provides one of the best insights into the dilemmas facing a system whose power appeared so strong, yet was manifestly weak in its ability to deliver sustained public goods other than the maintenance of its own power. Like so many systems of despotic power, instability is inherent in the very mechanisms intended to achieve stability. Everything looks like it is forever until one day it is gone.

This is the paradox that characterized the Soviet Union earlier. Frye does not delve into much theoretical analysis or model building, and instead focuses on top quality empirical analysis. There is no theory of the post-Soviet state; Frye instead draws on mainstream American political science. He does so with style and verve, including lively personal impressions and anecdotes. The work is scholarly yet accessible. Its conclusions are convincing, yet as Russia once again entered a period of political turbulence following the invasion of Ukraine, all bets were off on how the

system would develop. Frye's insights are invaluable in helping us understand how Russia was governed up to that point, but attempts to render the weak strongman into a strong strongman will undoubtedly be plagued by the same dilemmas that Frye identified earlier.

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