

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 Orbán’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>.