

Frey, Timothy. *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022, xxi + 271 pages. Paperback, \$21.95.

With *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*, political scientist Timothy Frey makes a significant, if imperfect, contribution to the study of Russian politics. As the title suggests, the work rejects the all-too-common depiction of Russian president Vladimir Putin as an omnipotent ruler, choosing, instead, to portray the Russian despot as a personalist autocrat—one of many around the globe—who is able to maintain his tenuous grip on power only by placating elites while not needlessly alienating the populace. To buttress this argument, Frey cites cross-national studies and the recent scholarly literature on Russia.

Not surprisingly, the author also has much to say about such subjects as the Russian economy and Putin's popularity. Regarding the former topic, Frey performs the reader a valuable service by dispelling popular misconceptions about the economy, ably arguing it is neither as robust as Putin maintains nor as anemic as his detractors would have one believe. Similarly, the author makes a persuasive case that the prevailing skepticism about the accuracy and political significance of Putin's exceptionally high public approval ratings is largely unfounded.

It bears mention, at this point, that the book's discussion of Russian foreign relations offers some especially compelling reading. Pointing to several factors—including a sizable possession of nuclear weapons—that distinguish Russia from other countries sharing a similar type of governing regime, Frey notes, at the outset, that foreign policy is the aspect of Russian politics to which the findings of the cross-national literature on personal autocracies are least applicable. It is here, rather than in the domestic sphere, that he argues, that great power-ambitions and the values and beliefs of Putin and his advisers have relevance. He then proceeds to apply this analysis to a number of developments in the international arena, most notably, NATO expansion, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the signing of the New START arms

control treaty by the United States and Russia. It is worth noting the foregoing agreement has taken on added significance with Putin's recent announcement that Russia is suspending participation in the treaty. (Published in 2021, the previous version of this book predates Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Accordingly, the author has added an appendix addressing the early days of the conflict.)

Currently, it seems worth pointing out that Frey does an estimable job of making his work accessible to a general audience. Indeed, the book is peppered with personal anecdotes, everyday analogies, and pop culture references. A case in point: the epigraph for one of the chapters comes from late night talk show and political satirist Stephen Colbert. Moreover, the author's repeated admission that academics bear some of the responsibility for the American public's distorted view of present-day Russia strikes this reviewer as refreshing, even laudable.

None of the above is to suggest, however, that the work is without its share of deficiencies. For example, while previous scholars may have overstated the importance of Putin's unique characteristics in determining the course of Russian politics, Frey—with the exception of his discussion of the nation's foreign policy—appears to go too far in the other direction. Also, he could have devoted more attention to the literature of the Soviet era in Russian history.

On balance, though, the book serves a positive purpose, providing an insightful and well-researched account of Putin's Russia. There is no gainsaying the work has much to offer not only the general public, but also serious students of Russia, international relations, and political economy.

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