

*Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* by Timothy Frye

## Making the case for exploiting Russia's internal crisis

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Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*, Princeton University Press, 2021.

In April, Princeton University Press published Timothy Frye's newest work, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*. The author is a political science professor at Columbia University with an endowed position at the Harriman Institute, research director at Moscow's Higher School of Economics, editor of the academic journal *Post-Soviet Affairs* and member of the Council on Foreign Relations. With top academic appointments in the United States and Russia, Frye has close ties to powerful interests in both countries and is frequently featured in the Western media as part of the anti-Putin crusade.

In publishing *Weak Strongman*, which is making the round of book talks at major universities, Frye is motivated by concerns that the crude and facile character of the anti-Russia crusade in the Western media is causing misunderstandings about the nature of the Kremlin and Russian society more generally. In his view, this could result in tactical mistakes and missed opportunities to promote regime change.

In the opening chapters of the book, Frye identifies two common misconceptions in the Western view of Russia. The first, what he calls "Putinology" seeks to trace back all aspects of modern politics in Moscow to issues related to Vladimir Putin's allegedly "anti-Western" worldview, KGB background, lust for power and personal psychology. The second approach argues that Russia's people are inherently passive, conformist, undemocratic, comfortable with corruption, and desirous of autocratic rule. Of this latter view, Frye writes: "In the worst cases, we hear broad generalizations about the 'Russian mentality' or 'the Russians' without any recognition that Russians' views on most issues of the day are as diverse as the citizens of any country."

Frye objects to the method of the blood-curdling anti-Russia campaign, not the aim—regime change. He repeatedly compares Russia to Venezuela and Turkey, both countries whose governments the US has recently attempted to dispense with.

In making his case, the author paints a portrait of Russia's internal crisis. After an economic boom that he dates as lasting from 2000 to 2014 (albeit interrupted in 2008 and 2009), the country is now stagnating.

During this period of Russia's relative economic growth, state involvement in key sections of industry grew, becoming a major source of government revenue and resources to divvy up among the elite. For instance, 80 percent of the shares in the Russian gas giant Gazprom are owned by the state, up from 10 percent at the start of Putin's tenure. But as the economy has lost steam over the last seven years, it has gotten more difficult for Putin, who manages a vast apparatus of state bureaucrats, security agencies and business elites, to retain loyalties and navigate

demands by doling out economic spoils.

At the same time, the close link between political access and wealth means that those without connections or who have fallen out of favor cannot get as much as they want. Despite the recent setbacks to the Russian economy, what is at stake is not small. Frye cites a study by Natalia Lamberova and Konstantin Sonin that estimates "that when oil prices were about \$70 per barrel, members of the [Putin's] inner circle reaped \$800 million a year more than other Russian members of the *Forbes* list [of the super-wealthy]." Another scholar found that "firms with CEOs who won a seat in the regional legislature boosted their company's revenues over a term in office by 60 percent and their profitability by 15 percent relative to those firm owners who ran for a seat and lost."

It is within this context that warfare within the ruling elite is intensifying. The Russian legal system is serving as a key means to dispense with economic rivals, seize assets or force a more loyal relationship with the state. "Each year about 100,000 businesspeople are charged with economic crimes, and the number of such cases increased by about one-third in 2019," Frye reports.

Political conflicts abound, with arrests of both critics and seeming allies of the government. Frye notes, for instance, that while opposition mayors are four more times likely to be detained, because most heads of localities are members of the ruling United Russia party, "the majority of arrests actually involved pro-regime mayors, some of whom may have fallen afoul of their superiors." While Frye repeats the unproven allegations that the right-wing, anti-Putin oppositionist Alexei Navalny was poisoned by the state, he says that it is not clear whether this was done at the president's orders.

Political and economic instability contribute to Russia's high levels of capital flight. Between \$250 billion to \$300 billion was pulled out of the country during the period from 2014 to 2018. According to Frye, *Bloomberg* found that Russia's oligarchs keep more of their holdings in US dollars than the superrich in any other developed country. The Kremlin's efforts to bring even the wealthy state bureaucrats under control have not worked all that well, with members of parliament choosing to divorce their spouses rather than having to report the foreign holdings of their wives and husbands. The banking sector also still has many firms whose primary role is money laundering, hiding income and high-risk transactions.

Frye does not explicitly make the point that the "anti-corruption," "pro-democracy" movement in Russia—led by figures like Alexei Navalny and the ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskiy—is driven by elite frustrations over the state's heavy hand in distributing the surplus value extracted from the

Russian working class, the dependencies and anxieties this creates, and concerns over the government's ability to protect wealth that is highly integrated into a global financial system still dominated by the US dollar. However, it is clear from what he describes that this is the situation.

The fissures in Putin's Russia go beyond just those seen at the top. Social inequality is extremely high, Frye notes, with the World Bank estimating the country's Gini coefficient at .38, just slightly below the US' .41. The top 10 percent take in 50 percent of Russia's total income, a level also on par with that in the US. The country is also plagued by geographic inequality. He notes: "Data from the Russian state statistical agency indicates that majorities living in small villages lack access to centralized sewer systems."

By contrast, "[t]here are Jaguar dealerships in every city with more than a million residents." Putin's much-vaunted "national projects"—large infrastructure and social service improvements promised in the 2000s—have either failed entirely or provided new sources for graft. The fact that these staggering levels of social inequality are a direct result of the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which was fervently supported by Washington, goes unmentioned, of course.

Frye argues that the Kremlin's approval ratings, which he believes are not inflated, do not capture the real scope of social discontent. The author points to survey data that shows that only about 30 percent of the population describe themselves as "fond" of the president in 2020. There is "little trust in public institutions such as the government, police, Duma, or courts," and most think the state rules on behalf of the oligarchs. When it comes to economic questions, the Russian population overall has a much dimmer view of the state. In order to produce repeated victories at the polls for the ruling United Russia party, pressure is placed on workers. According to one study, 57 percent of all poll violations in the 2011-12 election cycle "involved employers, and of these 83 percent involved voter intimidation via threats of dismissal, cuts in pay, or declines in working conditions."

His overview reveals a fractured society—a reality of which the Kremlin is acutely aware. The author quotes former Putin advisor Gleb Pavlovsky, speaking in the aftermath of large anti-government protests in 2012, which were dominated by layers of the upper middle class but triggered fear of wider unrest within the working class. "In the Kremlin establishment, there has been an absolute conviction that as soon as the Kremlin is shifted, or if there is some mass popular pressure, the appearance of a popular leader, then everybody will be annihilated," he said. Pavlovsky added, "As soon as someone is given the chance—not necessarily, the people, maybe the governors, maybe some other faction—they will physically destroy the establishment, or we'll have to fight and destroy them instead."

In explaining how Putin maintains his grip, Frye explores the issues of electoral politics, repression and media manipulation. The Kremlin resorts to gerrymandering, setting impossible thresholds for opponents to get on the ballot, deafening political propaganda campaigns, extensive press censorship, government control of the media, the suppression of oppositional views in the press, arrests of government critics and crackdowns on protests. The security services play a large role in the government, Frye reports, with "about one-quarter of the governors, 20 percent of presidential administration, and one-quarter of the heads of state-owned companies" being tied to these institutions. (While the author insists that these are the methods of a "personalist autocracy," anyone familiar with the politics and recent history of the United States knows that similar methods are used.)

Towards the end of his book, Frye takes on the question of foreign policy. The author emphasizes Russia's geopolitical weakness and the relationship of this to the country's domestic situation, observing: "Putin would like to spend more on guns and butter, but can't do both." He rejects the idea that the country is really a great power, or capable of being

one, or that anti-Westernism is what is driving the Kremlin's actions.

But the question then naturally arises: If Russia is "playing a weak hand," as Frye states, what is the basis for the crazed anti-Russia war drive in the United States? The author never addresses American interests with regards to Russia. He hems and haws over NATO expansion and whether it is really an anti-Russian provocation. While noting that its 2017 military spending was \$900 billion, compared to Russia's \$67 billion, Frye acts as if the fact that the US-led alliance has amassed a massive war machine on Russia's western border is within the realm of the normal. Reading this work, one would get the impression that the Kremlin is running amok in Europe and the Middle East for no apparent reason.

Remarkably, the book devotes barely more than a paragraph to Russian-Chinese relations, although China is the country's top trading partner, and Beijing and Moscow have been driven into a geopolitical relationship of convenience based on mutual fears of US war preparations. The fact that Moscow is spinning around like a top trying to navigate the implications of the US war drive against a country with which Russia shares 2,600 miles of border appears nowhere in *Weak Strongman*.

Frye's final chapter is on "Russian hacking." The author repeats and accepts at face value every allegation made against the Putin government, from the unsubstantiated claims about "Russian meddling" in the 2016 elections to the Kremlin's alleged promotion of social grievances over race relations in the US. He brings forward no new evidence and makes no mention of any countervailing positions.

He cannot deny the long American history of "meddling" in the affairs of nearly every country on the planet. But he preposterously claims that "US interference in foreign elections was common during the Cold War, but these efforts have declined since 1989." He seems unaware of the implications of his statement that "More recently, in summer 2019, the United States let it be known that it had placed 'potentially crippling malware on Russia's electrical grid'"—as if Washington's preparations to plunge 144 million Russians into darkness is of no particular significance under conditions in which Moscow is endlessly accused of cyberwarfare.

What is Frye's purpose in writing *Weak Strongman*? In emphasizing Russia's internal crisis he aims to argue that there are opportunities to bring about regime change without pursuing a full-scale war with Moscow. He speaks for, and to, sections of the American foreign policy establishment and Russian opposition circles, who share this view.

But these imperialist interventions have a logic of their own. Washington will not stop at regime change in Russia, or China for that matter. These states, which cover one-third of the world's land mass, will never be allowed a seat at the imperialist banquet table. The aim is to break them up and reduce them to semicolonial status.



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