

Intelligence in Public Media

Russia Without Putin: Money, Power and the Myths of the New Cold War

Tony Wood (Verso Books, 2018), 210 pages, endnotes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Allen N.

In mid-April 2022, two months after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Moscow-based Levada Center released results of public opinion surveys regarding Russian parties and politicians, the conflict in Ukraine, and international sanctions. In this series of surveys, President Vladimir Putin had an 82-percent approval rating, an increase of 11 points from the same survey in February 2022;^a 81 percent of respondents supported the recent actions of Russian armed forces in Ukraine; and attitudes toward the West continued to deteriorate.

These numbers bring into sharp focus the relationship between Russians and elite politics. Historically, the Russian public meshed politics with cynicism, simultaneous with unified support for political elites. Indeed, the dominant feelings among Russians caused by Putin's military actions in Ukraine are "pride for Russia" (51 percent), "anxiety, fear, horror" (31 percent), and "shock" (12 percent), according to the Levada Center. Because there is potential for collective opinion to sustain Moscow's continued commitment to military actions in Ukraine, the Levada surveys leave defense analysts, like this reviewer, with the impression that the belief and values of the Russian people continue to shape Russian leaders and politics—something approaching a less Putin-centric nation.

In 2018, Princeton lecturer Tony Wood anticipated these issues in his prescient *Russia Without Putin*, which deserves a relook by today's intelligence practitioner. Wood shines a spotlight on the Russian popular mindset without fixating on Putin, instead emphasizing a country engaged in the implications of great power competition.

Russia Without Putin is purposeful with its research questions: How is Russia ruled, and for whose benefit? What are the consequences for Russian society? And, how can we best explain Russia's mounting clashes with the West? The challenge here is, according to Wood, "to

discard several core assumptions behind most discussions of Putin's Russia." (4)

Wood adds four structural insights to the conversation about the relationship between the Russian popular mindset and the Moscow's political commitment to invading Ukraine. First, deeper and detailed conversations are needed about the conditions that allowed Russia to thrive and whether they will continue beyond Putin. (30) Second, Wood explicates a largely underestimated factor that social structures held over from the Soviet era shield the Putin regime and its allies. (85) In chapters two and three, for example, Wood demonstrates that since 2000, Russia operates on two drivers, one rooted in neoliberal principles and the other in a strategic statism, which creates an unequal society. To Wood, there is a particular form of capitalism in Russia that blurs the boundary between the state and the private sector. (23) Wood goes on to show how that system and political elites will not be affected by sanctions, nor will it be altered in the unlikely event of Putin's removal from power before his term is up. (55)

For Wood, the new Russian middle class, transformed by the political elites who coopted the Soviet skilled labor and intelligentsia classes, is kept alive by the Soviet past at the expense of democracy. (57) Putin inherited an authoritarian system, and he used Russian institutions in it as tools to shift between promoting pro-West policies in the early 2000s and reacting offensively against Western intervention in the 2010s. (5) In chapters three and four, Wood suggests the Russian political system is designed to exclude the opposition and foster disunity among anti-Putin movements, which better renders and exacerbates far-right nationalism. (91–110) The front man to anti-Putinism, Aleksei Navalnyi, likewise has often endorsed chauvinistic and nationalistic slogans, which materialized in organizing support for Russia's intervention in Chechnya and the 2008 war with Georgia. (104–5)

a. Levada Center, "Approval Of Institutions, Ratings Of Parties And Politicians," <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/04/11/approval-of-institutions-ratings-of-parties-and-politicians/>.

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The third structural insight is further evidence that the Soviet past drives Russia's international stature and that it is therefore necessary to focus on the superpower world view lingering within the collective Russian mindset. (115–21) In chapter five, for example, Wood traces Russian nationalism back to a “pervasive and deepening anxiety about Russian weakness” to accomplish a Eurasian destiny. For Wood, an emerging *Novorossia*—New Russia—compelled the Putin administration to reassert Russia's global relevance and reset a strategic imbalance with the United States on the world stage. (126–33) Deploying *Novorossia* thinking primes Russia for an inevitable confrontation with the West, and its dominance over its periphery continues as a historical and geopolitical necessity for the Russian public. (153)

Wood's fourth insight is that Russia's geopolitical influence is essential to how Russians see their future and the obstacles and opportunities en route. (148) In chapter six, Wood suggests that Russia's attempts to establish a liberal order over the former Soviet bloc, simply because

of its physical location (155) and its resource-dependent economy (159–65), will incite more unpredictable operations. According to Wood, Moscow's support to Syria, annexation of Crimea in 2014, and support for secessionist rebels in Donbass are symptoms of Russia's short-term tactical maneuvers to halt the West's expansion. (156, 169) Unfortunately, Moscow's expeditionary adventures have opened a Pandora's box of separatisms that Russia had apparently fought so hard to keep shut since the 1990s. (169)

Russia Without Putin is an essential contribution to the conversation about Russian national consciousness and foreign policy. Wood reminds Western analysts that Russian popular sentiment is a post-Soviet space saturated with previously established ideas and institutions rather than an innovative national identity. (176) In turn, his work highlights the importance for Western policymakers in carefully considering both the audience and the message if we are to have any hope of shaping Russian strategic behavior in ways conducive to US interests.



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