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Dawisha, Karen, 2014. *Putin's Kleptocracy – Who Owns Russia?* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Review by Astrid Hedin

A good decade and a half after the opening of the Berlin wall, the university textbooks on International relations have almost forgotten about the Soviet Union and the European East-West divide – and suddenly, inexplicably, the security situation in Europe is as unstable and dangerous as ever. Russia under Putin is making it clear that the country is not content with the post-Cold War order, and is willing and ready to use deception, bullying and force to have it changed. To the bewilderment of the West European audience, the Putin regime is describing its on-going power grab in the former Soviet colonies as a historical struggle to defend Russian state-civilization against the West. How did Russia get to this? Weren't we friends now?

On the topic of Vladimir Putin's rise to power, the three most influential books are arguably Karen Dawisha's *Putin's Kleptocracy* (which is our focus here), Masha Gessen's *The Man without a Face* (2012, now available in paperback in Swedish), and Edward Lucas' *The New Cold War* (2nd edition in 2014). The three books have in common that they all describe how informal networks of former KGB officers and Soviet era military – the so called *Siloviki* – discontent with the democratization of the Soviet

sphere, re-conquered the Russian state, in collusion with organized crime and with Vladimir Putin as their helmsman. Gessen's book has a biographical and psychological focus on Putin as a person, Lucas' highlights the "pipeline politics" of how the Kremlin uses its natural resources to boost its international power, and Dawisha's book follows the money. Dawisha retraces the personal networks around president Vladimir Putin and their involvement in looting the Russian state for personal gain, and using the money to augment their political power. Dawisha's essential message is that Western analysts should stop looking at current-day Russia as a case of failed democratization – as she herself did for many years – and instead as an authoritarian project that has succeeded. The book *Putin's Kleptocracy* has a political agenda, and that agenda is to reveal the squalid character of the Putin regime, its cronies and kleptomaniacs. Dawisha's story of theft and thuggery has received much attention, including reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, the *New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, and by Anne Appelbaum in the *New York Review of Books*.

In this review, I will bring up three themes: Dawisha's focus on social networks as a key method of analysis; the violent character of contemporary Russian politics; and the debate on which theoretical label is relevant for the current regime. In the book's introduction, Dawisha poses the question of why political science didn't provide a better commentary and analysis of the Putin regime at an earlier point of time? In my view, in order to better understand the Russia of today, political scientists and historians must address and amend some of the negligence and mistakes conducted in the study of the Soviet Union in the past. In my opinion, it is time to have a second look at the old textbooks on comparative political systems and how they failed to educate a generation of political scientists about how the Soviet

Union really worked, and hence led us to underestimate the weight and implications of its non-democratic legacy.

Karen Dawisha wrote her first study of the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, when she dissected the Kremlin's 1968 decision to invade Czechoslovakia to quell the reformist movement of the Prague spring. In her current book, *Putin's Kleptocracy*, she has rolled up her sleeves and taken on an unconventional project for a political scientist. *Putin's Kleptocracy* is a monumental work of investigative journalism into the origins and actions of the personal networks around Vladimir Putin, and how these named individuals have used political power to plunder the Russian state as well as competing market actors. The research project has taken many years, and gives due credit to domestic Russian language investigative journalism, including Masha Gessen's work. As several reviewers have commented, Dawisha's book reads like a who-is-who of the targeted Western sanctions – visa bans and the freezing of assets – against Russian individuals.

Dawisha uses a social network approach to retrace where Vladimir Putin came from, from whom he garnered support under way, and whom he brought with him to the pinnacles of power. Dawisha shows how, when Putin took office as the president of Russia in 2000, his early recruitments drew on old friendships from the organizational environments of which he had been a part, including his childhood judo club; his training at the KGB academy in St Petersburg (then Leningrad); the KGB station in East German Dresden where Putin was posted 1985-1990; as well as his time in the post-Soviet mayor's administration in St Petersburg, and his early associates in murky foreign trade deals there, which had traditionally been under state control. Dawisha points out how, while making these appointments that placed former KGB staff in the new government, Putin was paying lip service to the ideal of democracy. If Western analysts had only taken Putin's choice of staff

and ministers more seriously, the regime's later authoritarian turn may not have come as such a surprise. In Chapter 6, "The Founding of the Putin System", Dawisha writes about a leaked, written master plan for the 2000 takeover, which aimed to use the FSB to "control the political process". In this plan, under a long section entitled "Information War with the Opposition", examples were given of how to pre-empt, suppress and discredit hostile accounts in the media. In retrospect, the early days of the Putin regime were rife with warning signs – at least for those who could read Russian language publications.

Dawisha does not develop any theoretical arguments concerning her social network approach, but someone ought to, so I will: In phases of turbulent political change, social networks are enduring structures that outlive formal institutions. They allow for coordinated, concerted action – a resource that is especially scarce in a situation of fundamental political transformation. As I found in my study of the reformation of the former communist party SED during and after the democratization of East Germany (*The Politics of Social Networks*, 2001), social network ties among trusted individuals outlive monumental historical changes and the collapse of formal institutions. Social network ties can accommodate very substantial changes in policy – people change their political agenda but not their political collaborators. However, social networks may also support and conserve more fundamental types of political identity i.e., basic views on how the world is constituted and what makes it tick, and perceptions of who belongs to "us" and "them"; who is the enemy and who is a friend. Basic to the discourse that held the Soviet Union together was the regime's self-identification as a great power in opposition to Western capitalism – a categorization that identified even the most trivial forms of non-compliance to the Soviet regime as the actions of an "enemy within" i.e., as a representation of the geopolitical enemy in the West. Today, when the Russian regime forces non-profit Western

NGOs in Russia to register as “foreign agents”, arguably, I would claim, this is the discursive heritage it draws on.

Somehow, during the first fifteen years of Putin’s reign, the basic fact that Putin is a trained KGB agent, spent 17 years in KGB service, reached the Russian presidency via the post as chief of the FSB (the successor organization of the KGB) and recruited many allies and helpers from the sphere of the former KGB, long failed to decisively impact the overall positive and optimistic Western assessment of the Putin regime. I argue that if we wish to understand more about Russian foreign policy today – its toolbox, means and ends – we must learn more about the historic KGB, its worldview and methods. This is a line of inquiry that, ironically, is much easier to pursue today, after the collapse of the USSR, when former satellite states and subordinates are opening their archives for research (for example, in April 2015, the Ukraine opened its KGB archives). Obvious topics for investigation of KGB activities against the West are the techniques of systematic deception and subversion, disinformation and the creation of political myths, discrediting opponents and supporting Western helpers and cronies. I would venture to argue that if contemporary political scientists had been read up on how old school KGB tactics worked, they would have been much swifter to de-mask the contemporary Russian regime’s efforts to manipulate foreign media and policy discourse during the Putin era. Some of these issues are being addressed by security scholars, who analyze the new policy of “non-linear” Russian warfare, as laid down in a January 2013 speech by the Russian army chief of staff Valery Gerasimov. But this theme deserves much broader attention, and a broadened set of analytical skills and research objectives. After the land-winnings of constructivism within the study of International relations, here is a plentiful field of research where methods of critical discourse analysis should really be able to prove their usefulness.

Another facet of Putin’s rule in Russia, which Dawisha’s book highlights, is its violent character. The 350-page narrative amasses a daunting pile of corpses. Journalists, liberal economists, earlier business associates with possible awareness of wrongdoings, opposition parliamentarians, former allies turned critics, truth-tellers concerning foreign military operations, a designed scape-goat for the Ryazan bombings that arguably helped bring Putin to power, journalists investigating possible FSB involvement in the Ryazan bombings, and opposition politicians questioning the Russian government’s version of events in Ryazan are beaten to death, murdered, charged with a variety of economic crimes that do not stick and die at the age of 48 after being released from prison, die of deliberate radioactive poisoning, die in a heart-attack under disputed circumstances, die of leukemia that relatives claim was deliberately caused, are killed by a hit-and-run driver on Cyprus, assassinated outside their apartment, die from a mysterious high fever and a rash, die in a plane crash, and die in a helicopter crash. And so on. Given this track record of contemporary Russian politics, the recent murder of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov in February 2015 should have come as no surprise. I would argue that the numerous incidents of political murders that Dawisha’s book recites must be put into the context of the Soviet past and the Soviet era training and toolbox of the *Siloviki*. When Karen Dawisha retraces Vladimir Putin’s years as a KGB agent in East Germany, the “lifelong ties” to other KGB operatives that he formed there, and his ascent to the presidential office via the FSB, she also retraces the roots of a revanchist mindset, the loyalty to the Motherland and the hope of resurrecting the great Russian state. But mostly, she focuses on the money.

Is Dawisha’s label of “kleptocracy” really adequate for the Putin regime? Dawisha herself brings up Way & Levitsky’s theoretical concept of “competitive authoritarianism” as an alternative framework, which focuses on

how political incumbents use the resources of the state – such as the courts, the media, the tax authorities – to tilt the political playing field in their favor. However, by now, Russia under Putin seems even worse off than that. Without credible political opposition candidates, there may be no democratic competition at all left to speak of, tilted playing field or not.

Dawisha doesn't develop whether her own term, "authoritarian kleptocracy", should be understood as mainly a political or economic label. Is the illicit aggregation of personal economic wealth really the most important defining feature of the current political regime? Dawisha's account does not give the impression that it is the economic incentives alone that drive the elites of the Putin regime. However, we can infer from her account the conclusion that the access to as well as lure of enormous personal wealth has enabled the authoritarian development. Also, Dawisha makes an important observation that speaks against the economist Mancur Olsen's influential prognosis on the likely future development of Russia. In his book *Power and Prosperity* (2000), Mancur Olsen made a prognosis based on rational choice theorizing; that economic elites in post-communist states would want to support the creation of a well-functioning market, which in due time would lead to an expanding economy and a democratic development. Here, Dawisha introduces a shift in the theoretical parameters that have ostensibly changed these (theoretical) incentives: Today's Russian oligarchs and Putin cronies can live abroad in the democratic and stable market economies of Western Europe, so do not have a personal interest in Russian political stability or rule of law. In verdant London suburbs, they can enjoy the safety and predictability of life and reliable bank accounts in a well-organized democracy, send their children to the best schools and live the good life. Their shady and violent business dealings in Russia do not ruin their investments or the lifestyle of their families. If the rational choice calculus is accurate, the

Russian ex-pat lifestyle should be a major hindrance to the long-term development of rule of law in Russia. In the light of this argument, targeted Western sanctions toward individuals supporting the Putin regime seem sensible indeed. In other words, Dawisha's model of "authoritarian kleptocracy" illuminates the logic behind the Western sanctions.

One reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* argues that the kleptocratic model of the Russian regime does not go very far in explaining Russia's policy. Despite its preoccupation with siphoning off enormous wealth from the Russian state, the regime is also trying to make the state stronger. Notably, there have been major investments in infrastructure such as roads and high-speed rails – and of course, in the Sochi winter Olympics. Not least, there is an ongoing major and systematic effort to modernize Russian military equipment and re-arm Russia by 2020. These political policies are not the policies of simple robber barons, but the long-term strategies of a regime that feels humiliated and wishes to resurrect the great power role of Russia in the world. This is a worrying insight. Reading Dawisha's book is a splendid start for trying to understand the origins of the increasingly aggressive foreign policy of our Eastern neighbor.

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Karpowitz, Christopher F. & Mendelbaum, Tali, 2014. *The Silent Sex: Gender, Deliberation & Institutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Anmälan av Johanna Rickne

Det finns en samhällelig norm som ger kvinnor mindre utrymme att tala i offentliga sammanhang. I Sverige kan normen exempelvis illustreras av talesättet att "kvinnan ska tiga i