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New Eastern Europe

BOUND TO EXPLODE?

UNCERTAINTY,
VOLATILITY AND
THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN RUSSIA
AND THE WEST

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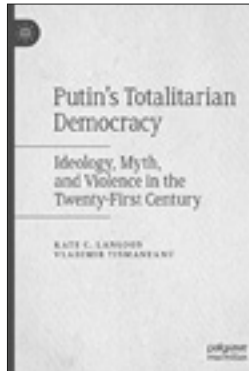
New dark times

A warning against the spread of Putinism

OSTAP KUSHNIR

Putin's Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century.
By: Kate Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu. Publisher:
Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 2019.

Thousands of books exist on Russian politics today. Slavic Studies can boast a strong tradition in Northern America, and generally in the West. The interest in Eastern Europe has also sky-rocketed since the 2014 events in Ukraine. Hence, what makes this artefact so special? On the back cover, the blurb tells you that “the authors reveal that an indoctrinating ideology and a willing population as the most crucial yet overlooked keys to analysing Putin’s totalitarian democracy”. For me, these lines immediately allude to



George F. Kennan’s *Long Telegram*. The US ambassador stated in the late 1940s that the stark decisions of the Soviet (Russian?) authorities were never questioned as their subordinates found it appropriate to be obedient. Therefore, straight from the cover, *Putin’s Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century*, written by Kate Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu, manifests its focus on anthropology, realpolitik, social determinism, and neo-classical geopolitics.

Precursor

The book further notifies the reader that it will elaborate on patterns of social dependencies and governance which are typical for the Kremlin-dominated space, regardless of the century. On top of that, the authors pay specific attention to state actors. This means two things. On the one hand, Russia is regarded as a state-wide political community which contributes to its *raison d'état*. On the other hand, the western states are portrayed as the most decisive actors from the perspective of which the relations with Russia should be assessed and constructed.

However, the doom of social determinism is not the only providing backbone to the book. Langdon and Tismaneanu do a great job introducing Russia-habitual processes into a wider contemporary context. They arrive with an updated Hannah Arendt concept: “the new dark times”, defined as an epoch “in which ordinary citizens fail to illuminate the wrongdoing – or do-gooding – of civilization and its leaders and hence allow for lies to degrade truth and human dignity... more and more populations across the world vote for exclusionary parties whose policies would result in economic disaster, isolationism, press censorship, and other impediments to the best interests of diversity, plurality, liberty, and human rights”. The global tolerance of Putin’s regime and his “totalitarian democratic” style of governance is the precursor

of the new dark times, as well as one of the drivers behind them.

The anthropological focus of the book resides, above all, in scrutinising the “behavioural” values of the Russian citizenry, not the “institutional” logic of the authorities and mechanisms of a centralised state. Inspired by Robert C. Tucker and Walter Laqueur, the authors portray Vladimir Putin as a leader who emerged in an environment of specific social demand. Putin is believed to provide security to all citizens of Russia, as well as gift them with a synthetic feeling of greatness. Langdon and Tismaneanu rightfully mention that Putin, as a personality, has been over-analysed recently; many researchers have attempted to look inside his head and construct his identity, whilst the assessment of the role of Russians was downplayed. The latter leads to an incomplete understanding of the local political tradition. Moreover, research on the psychology of the Russian president will not explain the potential arrival of new Putins in the future. Therefore, one of the fundamental achievements of the book is its focus on Russian society and its vision of the representative elites.

The book puts forward the hypothesis that, in an era of a crisis in global democracy, the Russian type of governance may become fit to fill the void of legitimacy. Under Donald Trump’s administration, the United States faces hardships in retaining its status as leader of the free world. The voters of Western

Europe – in particular, the UK, Italy, Austria, France, and recently Germany – slide into sympathising with far-right and populist leaders. In light of this, the Putin-led centralised system

of governance becomes attractive. It is Putin, not his democratic counterparts, who are often getting referred to as the world's most powerful figures in today's western media.

Putinism phenomenon

The Russian centralised system of governance, which gains momentum and attention, has been nurtured by the Russians and not without a reason. It converted a “local tribe” of Muscovites into a global political nation and their state into a champion of Eurasian sovereignty. Langdon and Tismaneanu argue that the citizens of Russia feel comfortable supporting their state as they believed it would perform a special *pro publico bono* mission. This feeds Russian nationalist narratives, justifies authoritarian practices and provokes collisions with the West. It also constructs the indigenous identity as benign to Putin-like leaders whose traits and activities are believed to reinforce the Russian cause.

Putin's Totalitarian Democracy touches upon many interesting aspects of Russian statecraft and ideology. A lot of attention is paid to the historical evolution of the ruling elites and their inclination towards authoritarianism. The phenomenon of Putin as a former KGB officer – a human being with political charisma and vision – has been specifically highlighted. Elaborating on his personality, the book progresses to Putinism as an ideology of contemporary times. It links

Putinism to the traditions of tsarism, imperialism, Eurasianism and Orthodoxy. Finally, the book assesses contemporary foreign policies of Russia – for instance, its presence in Syria and Ukraine. These policies are portrayed through the prism of Russian popular support for the violations of international law and human rights. The authors deliver a message that the citizenry would go along with any violations as long as the latter are presented as strengths of Putin and his regime.

The book ends with a deduction that Putin's Russia has evolved into a fascist and totalitarian state intending to erode the integrity of the democratic world. This intention is implemented through challenging the essence of political representation and the culture of leadership across the globe. The authors encourage their readers to listen to the voters who sympathise with the Russian narratives. Langdon and Tismaneanu also consider the need to look at the Russians themselves and analyse their values and practices. If done properly, this would help prevent the overspill of “totalitarian democracy” to the West and combat the threat of the new dark times.

Altar and the throne

The book, however, also provides space for criticism and future elaborations. Langdon and Tismaneanu perceive Russia as a typical “Hobbesian” nation-state, which cannot be done unconditionally. Contemporary Russians resemble a multi-layered political community much more than an ethnically homogeneous nation. Aleksandr Dugin even argues that the Russians failed to construct a “bottom-up” nation-state as they had always aligned to the “top-down” authoritarian, or even autocratic, hierarchies. In this light, the Russian state does not fully embrace the Enlightenment-originated practices of the social contract, neither has it reflected the essence of the post-Westphalian sovereignty. Therefore, from my perspective, it is much more productive to regard Russia as a post-imperial (or neo-imperial) entity, not a nation-state.

The authors seem to assess Russia’s political culture from a very western perspective. They put individual human beings at the centre of their analysis and apply universalist frameworks of diversity, plurality, liberty and human rights to explain the state-bound processes. They also clearly separate the secular nature of the state from its spiritual “filling”, which is perfectly fine for western societies, but does not work in the same way for Russia. The point is that, in

the light of the Orthodox tradition, the mere anthropocentric focus is misleading as people are believed to arrive in this world to struggle, and fulfil their divine purposes. The state serves as a medium here. It was Patriarch Kirill who declared human rights to be a “global heresy of human worshipping” which should not be applicable in Russia without precautions. Therefore, I find it reasonable to introduce a strong focus on Orthodoxy and messianism in the analysis of contemporary Russian society and its leaders. Indeed, the book includes a sub-chapter on religion, which brings very useful insights into co-dependencies between the throne and altar; however, the impact of the Orthodoxy on Russian identity requires more consideration.

Nevertheless, the book leaves a very positive impression. It provokes deep reflections and brings a new understanding to the western reader. Langdon and Tismaneanu managed to highlight the pivotal elements and values of Russian society which make the nature of the state so specific. Last but not least, the authors warn of the threats that Putin’s totalitarian democracy has on the rest of the free world. I should highlight that it is impossible to assess the whole multi-versity of this book within the scope of this review. But I encourage you to have a look under the cover. 