



Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?

Karen Dawisha

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The raging question in the world today is who is the real Vladimir Putin and what are his intentions. Karen Dawisha's brilliant *Putin's Kleptocracy* provides an answer, describing how Putin got to power, the cabal he brought with him, the billions they have looted, and his plan to restore the Greater Russia.

Russian scholar Dawisha describes and exposes the origins of Putin's kleptocratic regime. She presents extensive new evidence about the Putin circle's use of public positions for personal gain even before Putin became president in 2000. She documents the establishment of Bank Rossiya, now sanctioned by the US; the rise of the Ozero cooperative, founded by Putin and others who are now subject to visa bans and asset freezes; the links between Putin, Petromed, and Putin's Palace near Sochi; and the role of security officials from Putin's KGB days in Leningrad and Dresden, many of whom have maintained their contacts with Russian organized crime.

Putin's Kleptocracy is the result of years of research into the KGB and the various Russian crime syndicates. Dawisha's sources include Stasi archives; Russian insiders; investigative journalists in the US, Britain, Germany, Finland, France, and Italy; and Western officials who served in Moscow. Russian journalists wrote part of this story when the Russian media was still free. Many of them died for this story, and their work has largely been scrubbed from the Internet, and even from Russian libraries, Dawisha says. But some of that work remains.

Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia? Details

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From Reader Review Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia? for online ebook

Hadrian says

It's important to start with a note from this book's publication history - or rather how it almost wasn't published. The author, a professor at Miami University in Ohio, usually published her books through Cambridge University Press. However, they backed down on this one, owing to legal threats, even mentioning the threat of organized crime. Their correspondence can be found [here](#).

In March 2014, the United States announced the first of four rounds of sanctions against Russia in response to Russia's unlawful invasion of Ukraine. Economic sanctions are an established means in the field of international relations of censuring or coercing states without going to war. But this time, something was different. These sanctions targeted not just corporations or sectors of the economy, but specific individuals or organizations which were closely associated with Vladimir Putin himself. This specific action revealed that the United States government had long ago ascertained what Russia-watchers had guessed, what Russia's trading partners had ignored, and what Putin and his legions of internet-comment-troll propagandists had denied.

Putin's Russia has often been assumed to be a highly corrupt 'crony-capitalist' state for years, but this is, as far as I can tell, the first book to make a comprehensive analysis about how and why. Putin's corruption began not in 2008, or even as far back as 2000. Instead, she alleges that he was in highly lucrative trade deals with foreign governments in St. Petersburg in the 1990s, and was part of the efforts by the KGB to hoard its vast reservoirs of wealth before the collapse of the Communist Party in the 1980s.

In 1991, Putin was appointed to lead the Committee for External Relations of the Mayor's Office of St. Petersburg. St. Petersburg was and still is a major port of foreign trade for Russia, and Putin very quickly got his hands dirty in signing trade deals and earning high commissions. By 1992, there were reports of flawed price data coming from his office and shady deals for food aid which never materialized. An independent commission recommended that Putin be fired, but nothing ever came of it.

There are also paper trails showing Putin's links to several shadowy institutions. One example of this was Bank Rossiya, which was founded by money from the Communist Party and was involved with organized crime deals. There is the 'Twentieth Trust', a construction company which laundered money from the St. Petersburg budget to offshore accounts in Spain, and a real estate holding company, SPAG, which Putin was once a board member of, and was accused of money laundering for Russian mafia and Colombian drug gangs.

This process did not slow down after Putin's election (under questionable circumstances) in 2000. The plundering continued on a larger scale, but Putin needed to sweep aside any opposition to cement his own power base. This was part of the basis for his move to sweep aside the Russian oligarchs in the early 2000s. He removed or cowed into silence those who disagreed, and replaced them with members from his inner circles at St. Petersburg or from the KGB. He removed the CEO of Gazprom and replaced with his associate, Dmitry Medvedev, an old colleague from St. Petersburg who was to become his vice-president and (temporary) successor. Mikhail Khodorkovsky spoke too loudly against Putin, so the assets of his company, Yukos, were stolen and given to one of Putin's friends, Igor Sechin, former deputy Prime Minister and CEO of Rosneft, and were later absorbed into his own fiefdom.

In this way, we can say that Putin had no real intent of 'free market' reforms at all, even though he espoused it in previous communications with the West. From the beginning, Dawisha accuses, Putin's interest was in siphoning as much of Russia's wealth for himself as possible, and in establishing the connections and structures necessary to keep that wealth in his hands unchallenged. This is the core of Dawisha's argument - that the authoritarian structures of modern Russia exist because they were intended to exist. What fragile democracy Russia had in the 1990s quickly gave way to what she calls 'kleptocratic authoritarianism'. After that, the muzzling of the free press, the assassination of journalists, the closing of newspapers, and the unceasing waves of state propaganda on television there and abroad.

What is the result? A few people at the very top are fabulously wealthy, and many are still ravenously poor. 110 individuals hold 35% of Russia's wealth (it takes ~3,000,000 people [the top 1%] to hold 43% of America's wealth). I am well aware of the problems that wealth disparity already brings to the United States, but this is taken to an unfathomable extreme. The median total household wealth for a Russian citizen is still at \$871 as of 2013. This is the lowest of any of the BRIC countries.

In an assessment by the political advocacy group 'Transparency International', Russia is now more corrupt than Nigeria, another stereotypical petrostate where billions have been lost to greed. The total sum of bribes in Russia per year is more than the annual state budget. Dawisha includes charts of Putin's cronies and their court positions, and elaborate descriptions of how wealth is siphoned away. To take another example: the 2014 Sochi Olympics were the most expensive in history, at over \$50 billion. They were 20% more expensive than the 2008 Beijing Olympics, despite having 1/3rd of the events. According to some estimates, about half of that is lost to corruption.

Where goes Russia now? Thanks to sanctions and OPEC's oil ban, the price of oil is sinking to its lowest in years, and the ruble is falling too. Yet Putin has passed a budget for 2015 which assumes that oil will return to \$100 a barrel. (It has now fallen below \$70.) But even with expensive wars, it cannot be that easy to make Putin a pauper. But the state of Russia is now on more uncertain foundations, now that we have some glimpse of its organization.

Putin's Russia is authoritarian, revanchist, and an aggressor on the world stage. Those Putin can wave away in the name of 'national security' or blaming NATO or American aggression. But to tie him to the awful corruption of the 1990s would be a gruesome comparison, and one which strikes against his personal image of incorruptibility and working solely in the national interest (whatever that is).

The book is thoroughly cited, makes extensive use of its sources (many of which are publicly available, such as Wikileaks cables) and presents its information clearly. The one major dispute I note is a question of clear cause-and-effect: did Putin build his authoritarian state in order to get rich? Or was building his new Russia (similar to the old Russias) his first priority? That is still a topic for academics to consider.

The book is dedicated to 'free Russian journalism'. Much of the discoveries here were found piecemeal by independent Russian journalists. As early as the mid 1990s, there was evidence that Putin did not have clean hands. Even after Putin attempted to squeeze the life out of what was left, there are still some who continue to ask the right questions and search for truth, wherever it can be found.

4.5/5

[Updated on 9 February 2015 to clarify statistics and fix grammatical mistakes.]

Ross says

This is a pretty good book, but I prefer an earlier book by Masha Gessen about Putin titled "The Man Without a Face." Both detail the criminal steps used by Putin to gain control of Russia, but Gessen's book spent more time describing Putin and less on the fellow KGB agents and Russian mafia that he used for his rise to absolute power.

Today Putin is the most powerful man in the world and by far the richest. Western governments looked at his rise and said let's leave him alone and hope he just wants to be the richest man in the world. Let's not rock the boat. But now we find he wants more than being the richest man in the world. He wants the USSR back again.

He is now in the same position as Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin in 1935. Taking land that doesn't belong to his country because he knows the West are weak and cowards, just as Hitler and Stalin did and started the ghastly horror of WWII. The average citizen in the West neither knows nor cares about it, just like 1935. You say it can't happen again. We shall see. Sixty million died the last time.

TS Allen says

Stunningly detailed, this book's flaw is Dawisha's curious confidence that Russia has got where it is today more by conspiracy than by accident. But she also describes Putin's mode of operations better than anyone else: "he made illegal activities legal." Worth critically engaging with.

Iglen says

First, I have noticed that 3 people (at the moment of writing) gave this book 1 star, identically claiming that this book is not based on facts but pretty much work of fiction. It is coincidentally that this book is the ONLY book they have read. Also these reviewers did not reveal their names using pseudo names instead. Also ALL 3 joined goodreads in November 20014. I do not know what their real interest are and who they are working for, but even if they are and their opinions are for real, they are wrong. Book contains extensive bibliography, full version of which can be found on Miami University web site. If you google "Dawisha Putin's Kleptocracy Complete Bibliography" you will find it. There is possibilities of some inaccuracies (intentional or accidental) but I have ability to check it out yourself.

I have left Russia in 1995 but keep following via news and friends who are still there. Some general information was known to me already in rather anecdotal or rumor level form. However, book's author went extra mile to process extraordinary amount of sources and compile hair raising evidences of evil done by Putin. Even if Karen invented 99% of the information laid out in the book, remaining 1% is more then enough to put Putin to the a worse spot in Hell. Yes, he did not kill millions of people yet, but he already deserved a prominent spot among worst scumbags this planet has yet to produce, among Hitler, Stalin, Lenin etc.

I am surprised of by Karen's dry narrative, because her word are really causing pain and incredulity.

See it for yourself.

Victor Gotisan says

Probably, alongside with Masha Gessen's "The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin", is the best book about Russia's 90's years and VVP.

Karen Dawisha is a storyteller, but a one's who are sewing her story with a lot of well-documented facts, acts, opinions and data.

More than worth to be read !

Nicholas says

I have put my detailed thoughts here: <http://deceptioninhighplaces.com/reviews/putin-the-man-without-a-face>....

But in essence I worry about the quality of the evidence in the book and the uncritical way it is treated.

Barry says

The KGB always had control of the Communist Party's money. When the CP was outlawed, it became the KGB's money. Putin, a KGB agent, was always a crook. He formed a gang with a bunch of other spies and started a crooked bank in the 80s. When industry was privatized, they used their influence and money to buy companies. They've used their organization to make sure they keep their money. They're crooks, but they see themselves as patriots. They're sure that Glaznost was a western plot, and they want to put things back the way they were, but with private enterprise, with them in control.

Gordon says

Frightening and enlightening! An incredibly well researched exposé on what is known (and can be speculated with high confidence) on the rise of Vladimir V Putin to power. From humble KGB beginnings and early development in the world of espionage, subversion, criminality and deception as well as direct participation in the KGB's pivotal actions to divert Soviet wealth to holdings abroad in order to save the state from itself (i.e. from Gorbachev and Perestroika), we see how Putin learned skills and developed relationships early on that would serve him time and again in positions of increasing power and responsibility. Karen Dawisha tells a story of Putin's first person involvement in intrigue, crime, corruption, extorsion, intimidation, fraud, murder and terror that over time increases to the point where he is perfectly positioned to leverage the power of money, politics, and information he has acquired to control a nation. The details exposed are so profound, so well documented, and so terrible that no reader can be left unmoved or unconvinced of the threat Putin poses - to his people, to his country's future (economy & social well being), to Russia's near abroad, and potentially to world order.

Max says

Dawisha shows how Putin and the oligarchs amassed personal wealth and became the modern day tsar and boyars. She meticulously documents Putin building a tight network of powerful allies in politics, business and organized crime to dominate Russia. As Spanish investigators in 2008 concluded, Russia had become “a virtual mafia state.” Dawisha’s account is specific and convincing, naming names in what reads like a legal brief. The amount of detail can be overwhelming, but her points come through clearly and while her book takes some effort it is time well spent. I knew Putin’s reputation before, but now I know how he earned it. My notes follow.

In 1991 the Soviet Union descended into chaos under Gorbachev with the failed August 1991 coup, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the usurpation of power by Yeltsin. The economy floundered and law enforcement was non-existent. Displaced KGB and communist party insiders vied with existing black market mafias for control of businesses and trade. They took the country’s money and stashed it abroad. Former communist party assets and properties were snapped up at ridiculously low prices. Thus the Russian oligarchy was created. These tightly connected officials, including many former KGB, would use their control of commerce for political dominance. Their long standing hierarchy which enforced loyalty enabled them to succeed.

Putin worked for the KGB in East Germany (GDR) in the late 1980s. His roles included monitoring GDR officials and recruiting East and West Germans who travelled between the two Germanys. This evolved into stealing information and designs for weapons and high tech goods. He also was sure to secure loot for himself as was common practice. When the East German government fell apart in 1989 Putin’s objectives changed. He began recruiting former Stasi for the KGB. One close associate Matthias Warnig would help by opening a bank in Dresden for KGB and Putin’s personal use. Putin would later fill important positions in Russia with loyal friends he made as a KGB agent in the GDR and conceal dirty money through banks such as Warnig’s.

In 1991 Putin became an advisor to St. Petersburg Mayor Sobchak progressing to deputy mayor in 1994. He embraced the newly established Bank Rossiya which would launder KGB and CPSU money for Putin’s clique. Putin sold lucrative opportunities in state controlled businesses and established a network of friends who rewarded each other with tribute and patronage. Collaboration and turf wars with organized crime and mysterious unsolved murders were common. Putin was chairman of the St. Petersburg Committee for Foreign Liaison (KVS) from June 1991 to June 1996. In this role he was responsible for foreign investment in and via St. Petersburg through which 20% of Russia’s foreign trade moved. This position facilitated his ownership and investment in numerous business ventures as well as put him in control of a huge cache of favors he could dispense quid pro quo.

The Mayor’s Contingency Fund proved a good vehicle for money laundering. For example shortly after the Soviet Union’s collapse there was a food shortage. Authority was granted to trade oil for food. Putin’s network bought oil and other raw materials at artificially set low domestic prices and sold it for many times more abroad. Putin issued the contracts through the KVS charging huge commissions which were put into the contingency fund that Putin effectively controlled. The food was not delivered and money from the sale of the oil went into Putin’s foreign bank accounts. Putin frequently traveled abroad to manage his affairs during his time in St. Petersburg.

Putin was also in charge of the gambling industry in St. Petersburg managing the state's 51% interest. Putin claimed the state was ripped off by operators who skimmed the cash showing losses. True but Putin's security operation was one of the skimmers. This was one of many cases where Putin was happy to work with organized crime as long as they knew Putin was the boss who took a generous cut. Another example was the St. Petersburg Real Estate Holding Company (SPAG). SPAG was used to bring stashed money in foreign banks back into the country cleanly. It could be mixed in with legitimate money from duped foreign investors to further disguise it. Much of the gang money originally came from Russia. But some came from Columbian drug gangs who bought Russian property, later sold it and were allowed to export the money making it look clean. Putin always took 25% commission on SPAG transactions for his, rather the city's, contingency fund. Another vehicle for Putin's fortune was the Petersburg Fuel Company (PTK) where the underworld could easily skim cash from gas station sales, evade taxes and fix prices. But of course they had to share it with Putin and his friends at Bank Rossya and the insurance company Rus'. Another example of easy money for the Putin network was the Twentieth Century Trust designed to fund construction projects. The St. Petersburg administration made loans to the trust that were never repaid for projects that often were never built, the money spirited away by the Putin network. Projects that were completed included everything from villas in Finland to land deals in Spain for Putin and his friends.

In 1996 failing to get his ally Mayor Sobchak reelected he moved to Moscow but retained his St. Petersburg connections. Putin started using the Ozero Cooperative which funded dachas for him and his friends and provided a convenient alternative to the city's contingency fund. Putin, who supported Yeltsin's reelection, got a post in the Presidential Property Management Department, a perfect tie in to his past activities. The division had a rich collection of properties following Yeltsin's nationalization of communist party properties. These provided homes and investments for Putin's circle and could be traded for favors. Putin directly controlled billions of dollars of these properties on foreign soil. He was responsible for reclassifying them. He and his friends picked them clean, using the best to build their personal fortunes. In 1997 Putin became chief of the Main Control Directorate (GKU), the Russian equivalent of Inspector General. This put Putin in control of files collected on him and his friends. One who needed special care of was former Mayor Sobchak. To thwart pending investigations into Putin's and Sobchak's illicit activities in St. Petersburg, Putin arranged for emergency medical treatment for Sobchak in Paris. He had him spirited out of the country on a private plane.

In 1999 Putin became head of the FSB, successor to the KGB. He immediately brought in his old KGB and St. Petersburg cronies, demoted the old hands and got rid of entire organizations that had been investigating economic crimes. Putin went on to use his position to protect Yeltsin's "Family" and the oligarchs against enemies who were trying to expose their widespread corruption. In 1999 Yeltsin made Putin prime minister to ensure Putin would stick with him in the fight against his opponents who were planning to create massive unrest, declare a state of emergency and unseat him from the presidency. Given Yeltsin's physical and psychological deterioration, the Family needed someone strong. Who better than Putin? And Putin took control. Needing to rally the country behind him, Putin's pals in the FSB blew up apartment buildings in Moscow and blamed it on the Chechens. The plan was to terrify the country, show toughness in a little war and be the nation's savior. Despite a lot of evidence that the apartment bombings were not done by the Chechens, most of the country bought into it and Putin was favored to be the next president.

The Duma election in 1999 was clearly rigged as the European Observation Mission noted. It was no accident that Putin's opponents' results were much weaker than expected. Similarly there were widespread discrepancies in the votes in Putin's election victory for president in 2000. Immediately upon being elected, Putin went after the media. TV and newspapers had publicized his corruption including the FSB bombings blamed on Chechens. Investigative reporters were subjected to blackmail, threats and even death. Media outlets were subjected to cyber-attacks and Putin's puppet intelligentsia engaged in PR to discredit critical

journals.

The ostensible battle in the new Russia was between economists who believed in a free market Western style economy and the oligarchs who controlled most large businesses. Putin's idea was control by the state, not communist style, but through the oligarchs, subjugating them to the Kremlin. Those who opposed Putin found their businesses heavily taxed or forced into sale, their owners charged with tax evasion or other crimes and imprisoned. Those who played ball did well as did Putin who collected a fortune in tribute. A good example is the forced sale of the major media outlets NVT and ORT. The owner had already been forced into exile but still refused to sell his shares. Putin didn't care about the money just control of the networks which had criticized his handling of the sinking of the Russian submarine *Kursk*. In August 2000 the *Kursk* disaster played out as a huge national drama as trapped sailors tapped out pleas for help. Putin had the oligarch's close associate in Russia arrested, blackmailing the oligarch into selling to his designated buyer. The new owner quickly appointed Putin's handpicked administrators to run the networks.

Oligarchs found themselves regularly shaken down for tens of millions of dollars at a time by the Kremlin for contributions to "charities". One of the beneficiaries was the opulent billion dollar Putin presidential palace in southern Russia which is officially listed as a private residence. Its gates are appropriately adorned with the tsarist double-headed eagle resurrected to become the new state seal. In addition to shakedowns Putin continued to employ as he had since his early days in St. Petersburg intermediary companies to skim profits. Thus sales and purchases from giants like Gazprom and Petromed were made through these Putin controlled intermediaries which altered prices at will with the difference going to the Putin circle.

What all of this has meant for Russia is astronomical income disparity. Forget the top 1%; in Russia the top 110 individuals have 35% of the country's wealth. But despite the country's vast oil wealth the median wealth of a Russian family, \$871, is less than that of a family in India. Yet Putin's tightly controlled media validated his strident nationalism winning the average Russian's support. Most Russians buy the Putin line that the West is the cause of Russia's problems. The 110 have prospered due to unwavering loyalty to Putin which is why the 2014 US sanctions following Putin's Crimea invasion appropriately targeted key individuals. The financial interests of Putin's favored oligarchs and allied organized crime played an underreported role in the 2008 Soviet war in Georgia, the 2014 takeover of Crimea and the war in Ukraine. The oligarchs sell cheap gas and oil on credit to countries adjoining Russia. When the debts can't be repaid they take equity in local infrastructure in lieu of repayment. This creates important economic interests in these regions for the oligarchs. Just as in Russia they use criminal elements to exploit local populations for illicit profits in these outlying areas destabilizing them. The oligarch's mafia style tactics pervade not only Russia but everything Russia touches.

Jennifer says

3.5, really, but this book is important, so I'm rounding up.

As an academic work written for a popular audience, this started off dreadfully slow. In order for the author to demonstrate the extent of corruption surrounding Putin's rise to power it was necessary for her to thoroughly detail the names of people, places, companies, shell companies, and dollar amounts shifted, hidden, disappeared, etc., - I understand this. A mere summary would have made for weak evidence, which in this circumstance (in an age of information wars), is worse than no evidence at all. The author's attention to detail is meticulous and damning.

However, if while reading this book, you find that you are discouraged by the plethora of detail, just skip ahead to Chapter 5, where the pace of this book picks up significantly. It is there that the author begins to zoom out to a level from which the reader can begin to see the bigger picture and how all of the pieces of the web fit together. From there, the book goes on to discuss the current and future implications Putin's thirst for power has for Russia and the rest of the world.

This book is incredibly timely and deeply chilling. Putin has - literally - less than zero respect for boundaries of any kind and it was uncanny to watch that truth unfold in the headlines as I read this book.

Nik Krasno says

The first part of the book of Karen Dawisha follows the rise of Putin from anonymous KGB agent, stationed in Germany, in Soviet times till his ascend as the Russian president with distinct authoritarian and hands-on rule of the country. To showcase that Putin basically promoted to the positions of power his close associates from early days as a student, KGB officer and Saint-Petersburg deputy mayor, Karen allocates a lot of effort to follow their path within Putin's orbit. Mrs. Dawisha also elaborates on the criminal cases, directly or indirectly involving Putin, that were sabotaged, backtracked and ultimately closed after his rise to power. Although Karen mentions that she didn't find direct evidence proving that Putin took bribes, she brings up enough material that in a less authoritarian state with real rather than declared separation of powers should've been properly investigated and either confirmed or denied Putin's implication in corruption affairs. And there are definitely some serious question marks regarding some goings Karen mentions, *inter alia* about the alleged connections with the organized crime. Few of the alleged wrongdoings though, in my opinion, should have more political evaluation rather than criminal.

To demonstrate what I mean I can use Yulia Timoshenko, a former Prime-Minister of Ukraine, example, who was accused and indicted of abuse of powers and sent to imprisonment as a result of a clearly politically motivated court process. Many in the West claimed that she shouldn't have been prosecuted for taking the responsibility to resolve the gas conflict with Russia and signing unfavorable gas contracts to save her countrymen from freezing during the winter.. And I totally agree with this approach. Some of the described Putin's dealings may also fall into a political sphere rather than criminal.

The second part, which I enjoyed more, offers a more general study of distinctive features of Putin's governance, goals, *modus operandi* as the President of Russian Federation. I like Karen's observations, examples and conclusions, and particularly how the freedom of media and thinking was oppressed, oligarchs subdued, opposition 'choked' and dispersed. Karen attributes paramount importance to the document leaked sometime in 2000, encompassing a strategy how to change the President's administration to rule Russia and tries to prove that it is authentic and is being implemented. Her conclusion is that Putin's motivation is only enrichment and protection from possible prosecution.

I personally think that these motives may be true and I wouldn't be surprised, if Vladimir Vladimirovich would turn out as one of the richest persons on the planet, but I think they are incomplete and may also be outdated. I think at first these may have been the initial incentives, but over the years they evolved into a wider range of objectives. I think one of the 'newer' objectives is to return Russia's 'greatness', to bring back some territories and in a broader sense to reverse the Big Bang of the USSR. After so many years in power, Putin, in my opinion, strives now to enter history books as the leader who managed to bring in territories and with them some glory. I should mention here though, that I object any use of military means for achieving these goals, if they indeed exist, and belligerence towards Russian neighbor countries.

As opposed to Ukraine for example, where 'personal money-making' was unfortunately almost always the

only agenda for any politician or functionary, Russia was clearly different having always some ideology - that of 'empire', 'greatness' and pride.

I think Karen deserves credit for such a detailed research.

Few general notes:

Although I never knew the details to this extent, the world she describes, its intricacies, personal connections and manus manum lavat of the close to the boss circle, pretty much coincide with my own observations and I'm sure those in Russia and neighboring countries that preserved independent thinking over TV propaganda know more or less what's going on.

I would also prefer a more balanced approach, i.e. not only the justified criticism of Putin, but also mentioning of the positive sides. Many, even though oppose the methods how it was done, view positively the subordination of the oligarchs to the state, instead of chaotic and unrestrained rule of oligarchic clans and their influence on the governance, preceding his access to power. Also the notion of a 'strong leader' was always important to a big segment of Russian population even at the expense of personal freedoms, to which many are not that accustomed anyway. So Putin for many symbolizes such a strong leader, who can mock Obama and exert authority on others. That's why he's still very popular in Russia (and among many abroad), despite distinct decline in economical wellbeing of Russian population.

There are some inaccuracies in the book. For example, Sevastopol is mentioned as the capital of Crimea peninsula, while it's Simferopol.

On a more personal note, this is a rather cold study from someone, who doesn't have any feelings towards Russia, while for me having at least some sentimentality towards this country and its people, it's a bit too cold and one-sided :-)

To draw the line - it's a well-researched and informative book for all those who want to know Putin's background and that of his close circle. Its conclusions should be viewed as a substantiated theory for a debate rather than axiom.

3.5 out of 5 stars

Maru Kun says

Here is a picture of George Bush meeting Vladimir Putin. Take a look at that stupid grin on Bush's face. A few moments before Bush, that subtle judge of human character, would have "...looked into his eyes...and got a sense of the soul..." of Pootie-Poot, and Bush liked what he saw. Could that be a small, self-satisfied smile falling across Pootie-Poot's normally severe face?

Here is a picture of David Cameron meeting Vladimir Putin. Cameron looks earnest but Putin looks bored. Putin knows that the UK has taken privatization further than any other country and the best of the UK state's assets have already been spirited away. Pickings would be slim, so no wonder he's bored.

Here is a picture of Angela Merkel meeting Vladimir Putin. Merkel doesn't look happy while Putin looks amused.

Can you spot something in this picture that isn't in the other two? That's right – a large black dog. Merkel is phobic about dogs and if you believe Putin's excuse that he didn't know about Merkel's phobia and just wanted to be friendly then you will also believe in the objectivity of the review below by "smith", who joined goodreads in November 2014 but who apparently has only ever read one book. There surely must be openings for more subtle propagandists in the Russian Ministry of Information,

Chronologically Putin's Kleptocracy tails nicely onto Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire. The book begins shortly before the 1991 coup which lead to the collapse and ban of the Communist Party. A significant problem facing the KGB in the period up to the coup was what to do with the loot, with the billions in funds under Communist Party control that might help sustain its future or at worst provide a decent retirement package for ex-spies and apparatchiks.

The solution was to hide these funds in lawless tax havens far from any government control, such as Jersey or the City of London. This money became the seed money helping pay for much of the subsequent fraud and theft.

Right through Putin's career he has been the man in the right place at the right time. In this era he was with the KGB in Dresden, so was one of the relatively few KGB operatives with an understanding of foreign trade and business and contacts overseas who could facilitate later fraud. This book starts by explaining how Putin began to acquire the circle of friends and cronies that were to support his later career, with the next stage working on economic liaison board in St Petersburg,

Putin's career in St Petersburg seems to have given him ample opportunity to build his and his cronies' fortunes and the book goes into some detail in this area. This is a daunting read as once you have read through the first few plots to enrich Putin's judo instructors (now billionaires), his old interpreter (now a billionaire) or other ex KGB friends (now mostly billionaires) you've pretty much read them all. Two hundred odd pages of secret bank accounts, fake invoicing, money laundering, share swindles, wire fraud, black market dealings, real estate swindles and so on could be skipped by a casual reader or anyone who isn't researching a crime novel.

The latter half of the book gets more interesting, concentrating on Putin's election to President. A key issue in Putin's rise seems to have been the need of Yeltsin's supporters to find a candidate who would issue a Presidential Pardon to Yeltsin and help shut down related corruption investigations as soon as they took office. Again, Putin was best placed for the job, having more than a few of his own corruption investigations that needed suppression.

Putin and his cronies now face the problem of staying in power and preventing their own past catching up with them. Thanks partly to the complacency of the rest of the world during the first few years of Putin's rule - during which Bush looked to Putin for support on the misguided and failed "War on Terror" - this is looking like a challenge Putin looks well able to meet.

To what do we owe the Putin-Trump bromance - those honeyed words of mutual admiration and affection - the "Putin's praise is a great honor" and the "Donald Trump is a very bright and talented person"? Could this come from a shared love of bling?

The book includes a famous anecdote about Putin pocketing the jewel encrusted Superbowl ring of Robert Kraft, the US billionaire owner of the New England Patriots, who was attending a trade delegation at the time.

In truth I doubt that a joint appreciation of the use of gold plating in interior decoration is what really ties Putin, Trump, the US right wing and Fox News together in their communal love-in. More likely what they have in common is an authoritarian streak, as this interesting article on *The One Weird Trait That Predicts Whether you are a Trump Supporter* explains.

In theory the US Right wing should see Putin as an enemy of freedom and American values and oppose everything he stands for, but like some love struck teenage girl they just can't stop themselves fawning over that bad-boy persona. Frankly it's embarrassing.

The introduction to Putin's Kleptocracy includes a very telling point. The author notes that for the first time in US history sanctions against state action, Putin's annexation of the Crimea, were imposed not on the state itself but on named individuals, being the cronies surrounding Putin. This book goes a long way to explaining the logic of that approach and is a good case study in where twenty first century authoritarianism can lead.

Mary says

Impressively researched. Dawisha's sources seem to have one thing in common: they're mostly dead. Courageous investigative reporting, synthesis and analysis. I nominate her for a Pulitzer. Boy, would that send a message eastward! If you haven't been keeping a close eye on Putin's vertical control of Russia, this is the book for you. Now I understand why his siloviki and oligarchs don't just take him out now that things in Russia aren't going well any time soon. There is no good end to his reign. Fascinating and sickening to witness it play out. He must be exhausted from all the scheming and cheating and deciding. I meekly withhold 1 star because it reads a bit like a list with many names to remember. Perhaps she deserves the 5th star for fortitude. Undecided. On a positive note, Dawish thanks a Muskie Fellow at her institute for help on the book! 3 degrees of separation.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Matt says

An excellent, well-researched, and thoroughly documented account of how Vladimir Putin operates. I've read a fair amount about what makes Putin tick, and Dawisha gives the most plausible and comprehensive explanation and analysis. She does not come across as though she has an ax to grind and appears to treat her subject fairly, making the book both credible and, unfortunately, depressing.
