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THE STRONG MAN VLADIMIR PUTIN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RUSSIA, By Ayse Dietrich*, Published by I. B. Tauris, Bloomsbury Publishing, Written by Angus Roxburgh, Year of Publishing: 2021. Subject Area: Putin, Russian Politics. Book Type: Russian Political History. Total Number of Pages: 428. ISBN: 9780755639250, paperback, \$17.95.

The former BBC Moscow correspondent Angus Roxburgh who became a Kremlin media consultant wrote this book when he was a chief consultant for a four-part BBC television documentary titled 'Putin, Russia & the West'. His top-level interviews in Russia, the US, Britain, France, Germany, Ukraine and Georgia are also used to fill out the details of the events covered in his book. The author has used his personal experiences as an advisor for three years to President Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov. Roxburgh presents Russia's struggle for their future under Putin after the collapse of communism, her isolation for decades from the Western world, the failure of the West to understand her fears and aspirations during this new transformation with respect and her ambitions as a country that wants to be part of the world.

The book is comprised of an introduction and sixteen chapters. *Chapter one* starts with the announcement of Yeltsin's resignation and his designation of Putin as his successor, and Putin's inheritance from Yeltsin of a Russia that was economically and militarily weak, run by thugs, and patronized by the West. The author gives us very clear picture of a country dealing with mafia-style gangs, killings, and soaring inflation. He describes how impoverished Russians were selling their belongings on the pavements; Moscow had become a huge flea-market, railway stations were filled with beggars and homeless people, industries had collapse, and enterprises conducted business with each other by barter etc. The abrupt transition from communism and the loss of their own country shocked the Russians: the Soviet Union, a land of 250 million people in 15 national republics, had fallen apart. Twenty-five million Russians suddenly found themselves foreigners in their countries. The author states that the Kremlin's Western advisors did not know how to handle this dislocated society; and Western countries did not notice the chaos since they were obsessed with the idea of building capitalism, regardless of its immediate impact. The West assumed that Russians would simply know how to use their liberty; transformation would be quick and chaos was something

totally natural in a transitional period that would soon be replaced by normal life.

In *Chapter two*, the author talks about Putin's conciliatory gestures to the West, his approval of the closure of two Soviet-era military facilities abroad – a naval base at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam and a listening post at Lourdes in Cuba; his cooperation with America in dealing with the Taliban issue etc.

Chapter three is about his battle for economic reform. The author states that although Yeltsin carried out major projects such as mass privatization and the liberalization of prices that transformed the economy, the country did not have sustainable economic growth, inflation was high and the new private sector worked inefficiently. He emphasizes that Putin impressed the West with his economic reforms that stimulated the economy, and established the free market with the help of a new team of Western-oriented reformers to draw up a program. The author provides detailed information on briefings and sessions, projects and plans. He states that the *Gref plan* that was approved in 2000 during Putin's first term introduced tax and progressive pension reforms, adopted a new land code that made it possible to buy and sell commercial and residential land, eliminated barriers to opening and running a business, introduced civil service reforms, reduced personal income tax, and sped up negotiations on Russia's joining the WTO. This led to a sharp acceleration of economic growth, an influx of foreign investment and the strengthening of the ruble.

In *Chapter four*, Roxburgh talks about the crackdown on the free media. He states that Western traditions of balance and independence had not taken root under Putin, and one of Putin's earliest decisions was to start creating what he called the 'vertical of power', the gathering-in of all political power to the center, and effectively into his own hands.

In *Chapter five*, the author talks about Putin's concerns on whether Russia would be excluded from the top table, his belief that Russia was not being treated as a superpower any more, his craving for respect from the West and his Western-style approach to alliances by creating a new NATO–Russia Council to include the Russians in the Western alliance. This chapter also provides information on tensions over the Iraq issue and the growing confrontation with America on the cancellation of America's missile defense plans etc.

Chapter six concerns the start of what became known as the Rose Revolution that ousted Eduard Shevardnadze, ended the Soviet era of leadership in the country (which Putin saw it as a threat to Russia itself), brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power, democracy to countries on Russia's borders, and orientated Georgia towards the West.

Chapter seven, gives information on the Orange Revolution, a series of protests and political events that took place in Ukraine (seen by Putin as the most important for Russia of all the former Soviet republics since it was the last buffer between Russia and the ever-expanding NATO) in November 2004, his efforts to sort things out, how Ukraine became a battleground for influence, with the United States, Russia's open support for both opposing candidates, and Putin's reactions and his sanctions (the gas wars).

In *Chapter eight*, the author talks about the aftermath of the Orange Revolution in 2005, and how the West became powerless when Putin began to curtail democracy, create Nashi (Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement), crack down on Non-Governmental Organizations and turn off gas supplies to Ukraine, murder of the dissident journalist Anna Politkovskaya, URPO's violence

(Division of Operations against Criminal Organizations) within the Federal Security Service, growing tension between Russia and America over recent event in Georgia, America's threat to step in in case Russia does anything in Georgia.

Chapter nine is based on Roxburgh's own experiences as the chief Russia consultant and working for three years as an adviser to President Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov.

It talks about Putin's negative image created by his increasing authoritarianism, his stifling the opposition and increasing control over NGOs, and the murders of Politkovskaya and other journalists that resulted in calls from conservative quarters of the G8 to expel Russia from the organization. The main task of Russia's leadership was to burnish that image with the help of a Western public-relations company, so an American PR organization Ketchum and its Brussels-based partner, GPlus were employed by the Kremlin as a propaganda tool. The author mentions his work experience with Ketchum and Gplus, the state-controlled Russia Today (RT) and the Kremlin. He also discusses the invasion of Georgia and how it destroyed the positive efforts made by Putin.

In *Chapter ten*, the author talks about why Putin opposed the recognition of Kosovo's independence, which he believed would encourage a separatist movement in the Caucasus, and would send a message to the Chechens, the Abkhazians and South Ossetians that their demand to secede would not be ignored. He also discusses the Russo-Georgian war, the approach of the West to it, and its consequences.

Chapter eleven is about the backlash to the Caucasian war, the gas conflict with Ukraine, Russia's relationship with the new US president Obama, Medvedev's changing the agenda at home, and his foreign policy objectives to reconcile with the West over Iran.

Chapter twelve examines the global crisis and its effects on Putin's Russia in 2008 that exposed the weakness of semi-reformed economy, the government's effort to prevent the collapse of the banking system, and corruption which was the biggest obstacle to foreign investment, as well as the destroyer of the economy and a politically explosive issue.

In *Chapter thirteen*, the author discusses the question of whether there are signs of a division in the ruling tandem of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev and examines the similarities and differences between the two leaders.

Chapter fourteen begins with Putin's dramatic announcement of the scenario that had been created by the two leader to alternate between the positions of the presidency and prime minister. It talks about the 2012 election, the treatment of the opposition, and the dictatorship of the law by Putin and legal nihilism by Medvedev that became a tool of political repression. The chapter also stresses the contradictory attitudes of Russia towards the West: the West is viewed by Putin Mark III as prosperous and successful but at the same time evil because of their double standards and their support and financing of the opposition. For him 'Russia's democracy means the power of the Russian people with their own traditions of self-rule and not the fulfilment of standards imposed on them from the outside'.

Chapter fifteen provides information on a confident Putin ready to offer Russian values as an alternative to Western liberal democracy, and Russia itself as a bastion of conservative, traditional

values that occupies a superior place with its own sphere of influence and legitimate security interests. The chapter also examines the Putin's Crimean adventure which put enormous strain on Russia's budget, his strict control over the media and internet, the GRU (military intelligence agency)'s involvement in illegal activities, and Russia's war in Syria.

In *Chapter sixteen*, the author talks about Putin's fear that he was not allowed to run again in 2024, and his genuine worry that the oligarchy he has created is becoming autonomous. He states that their growing concerns and distrust drive them to consider scenarios for Russia's future under Putin and after he is gone. According to Roxburgh, Putin's control over the oligarchs and cronies is complicated; his system is "corrupt, larcenous and incestuous and stable only so long as the lynchpin at its center remained in place".

The book is written by Roxburgh, an eyewitness to Russia's transition from communism to today's Russia, and it is valuable as a first-hand source for information about the people and events of the Putin era. It is an excellent supplement to use in conjunction with other, more official sources.

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