

Critical Dialogue

Putin's Labor Dilemma: Russian Politics between Stability and Stagnation. By Stephen Crowley. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. 306p. \$125.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1537592721003649

— Timothy Frye , Columbia University
tmf2@columbia.edu

Q1
Q2

The study of autocracy has undergone a revival in the last two decades, and scholars of Russian politics have played a central role in this renaissance. Russia hands have examined elections, legislatures, and courts; mined the sources of President Putin's approval ratings; and analyzed how propaganda and misinformation buttress the Kremlin. They have depicted the rise of a new middle class, a surge in nationalist identity, and the dynamics of Russia's fractured opposition.

One topic conspicuously absent from the study of autocracy is Russian labor. Some might argue that such neglect is justified given the country's weak labor unions and relatively few strikes. Stephen Crowley begs to differ. In his important new book, *Putin's Labor Dilemma: Russian Politics between Stability and Stagnation*, Crowley makes the relationship between the country's political leaders and the working class central to Russia's postcommunist transformation.

Crowley argues that, even though labor strikes have been relatively few and sporadic in Russia under Putin, the fear of labor unrest has prompted the Kremlin to forego much-needed economic reforms and to compromise with labor to preserve social and political stability. Well aware of the difficulty of trying "to explain why something didn't happen," (p. 21), he presents an impressive array of evidence to make this case. Crowley documents trends in the politics of Russian labor over time, shows how strike activity has moved from large cities to smaller provincial towns left behind by Russia's economic boom in the early 2000s, and provides evidence that strikes have largely focused on avoiding layoffs rather than pushing for higher wages.

Crowley complements this overview with closely drawn case studies. His rich treatment of the Kremlin's response to protests in Russia's largest single-company town, Tolyatti (aka Russia's Detroit) is particularly good. Here he shows how cost-cutting efforts and large layoffs at the

automaking giant AvtoVAZ could only be accomplished with massive resources from the Kremlin to keep the firm and the city solvent and to quell opposition from workers.

Crowley's discussion of a wildcat truckers' strike that began in late 2015 is also excellent. Faced with the imposition of a new tax collected by companies with close ties to Putin, truckers across the country coalesced into an opposition movement. He shows how they initially focused on economic demands and avoided politics, in part because they had so little faith in the political system. But when the state plays such a large role in the economy, economic demands eventually become political ones. By the end of the protest, one leader of the movement even enters a quixotic campaign to unseat Putin. Crowley deftly depicts the folly of trying to separate political and economic demands in labor politics in Russia.

Throughout the work Crowley confronts the question of why the Kremlin so fears labor unrest, given the country's subservient official labor unions and low strike rates. He argues that even though the odds of labor protests bringing down the regime are low, they are not zero, and given the great costs to the Kremlin of losing power, it makes sense to address even long-shot threats to its power.

A great strength is Crowley's ability to put Russian labor politics in comparative context while also recognizing how Russia-specific features complicate those comparisons. The challenges of deindustrialization and the middle-income trap are hardly unique to Russia and play a central role in Crowley's analysis. More broadly the Kremlin faces the well-known dilemma of economic reform: economic reforms may bring the dispersed benefit of greater efficiency to society at large, but they also impose concentrated economic costs on specific groups that are well placed to block them. Thus, rather than encouraging layoffs at financially troubled large enterprises, the Kremlin continues to subsidize them to prevent politically destabilizing labor unrest.

While recognizing the general forces at play, Crowley also emphasizes how the Soviet legacy of political geography and town planning continues to shape labor politics. Soviet planners left Russia with far more medium-size and small towns than one would expect for its level of development, making coordination across cities a challenge. More than 30% of Russians live in cities with fewer than

100,000 residents, and only 14% live in its three largest cities. In Canada and Australia, these figures are 31% and 50%, respectively. In addition, central planners created many towns that rely on a single firm for their survival. Restructuring enterprises in these single-company towns is especially challenging because workers have few alternative sources of employment, and local political leaders fight hard to keep their cities afloat. In addition, the Soviet developmental model encouraged firms to provide a broad range of social benefits that regional governments are loathe to replace. The political logic of economic reform bites hard everywhere, but especially so in post-Soviet Russia.

Crowley's depiction of Russian labor demonstrates the agency of Russian workers (limited though it may be) and, in doing so, reveals the inadequacy of cultural stereotypes of Russian workers as largely apolitical and passive before authority but also capable of spontaneous strikes. In Crowley's treatment, Russian workers recognize that the deck is stacked against them but are quick to identify when structural conditions are conducive to extracting benefits from the state and their employers.

Crowley's work offers an important corrective to those who view labor as largely irrelevant to Russian politics. It also views the Kremlin as much more constrained by politics than many accounts suggest. Far from being an omnipotent ruler, Putin faces a difficult trade-off. As Crowley notes, "By preventing mass layoffs, the government can maintain social stability, but only at the cost of economic growth, the absence of which is itself a potential threat to social stability" (p. 205). Few observers are better placed to address these topics. Crowley has long been a keen observer of Russian labor politics, and by providing a nuanced treatment of a topic that has not received sufficient attention, he enriches our understanding of Russian politics and comparative politics more generally.

The book also raises some questions that merit further attention. If the Kremlin resolved labor unrest in Tolyatti, Pikalyovo, and elsewhere by providing massive resources to those who demonstrated, why did other workers and local leaders in other cities not follow suit? To put the question another way, why did successful strikers in these cities stay bought and not return to the streets? More generally, why don't we see more strikes when the government follows a policy of appeasement? Appeasing protestors only sharpens the problem of moral hazard because rewarding strikers increases incentives to strike.

To be sure, Crowley notes how the Kremlin uses "pre-emptive authoritarianism" to disrupt organizational ties between workers in large enterprises and prevent coordinated strike activity, but one might have expected more strikes once the Kremlin demonstrated that such actions would be rewarded rather than punished. It might have been helpful to consider an in-depth study

of a single-company town where one would expect labor unrest but it did not occur.

Appeasement is one tool to manage the potential for labor unrest, but so is repression. Present to varying degrees throughout Putin's term, repression looms increasingly large in Russia. In the last 12 months (that is, while Crowley's book was in production), the Russian state uprooted the main opposition movement led by Alexei Navalny, decimated the remaining pockets of independent journalism, and chased a good number of political opponents from the country. In chapter 9 Crowley depicts how the Belarussian state brutally repressed labor strikes following unexpected protests against vote fraud in the summer of 2020. Might workers in Russia now fear a similarly brutal crackdown and therefore avoid protest? More generally, what role did the fear of repression play in limiting labor protest in the Putin years? As the old Russian jokes goes, "In Russia, we use carrots and sticks. When we are done hitting them with sticks, then we hit them with carrots."

Finally, Crowley makes a convincing case that the threat of labor unrest has stalled economic reform in Russia, but how important was the fear of labor unrest relative to other factors in this outcome? Answering this question is a challenge, but it would be helpful to consider the relative importance of other explanations for labor's quiescence and the failure to introduce economic reforms. Narrowly interested oligarchs, high energy prices, and weakened institutions of accountability are all part of the story too.

These questions aside, Stephen Crowley has written a terrific book on an understudied topic in Russian politics that also raises important issues for comparative labor studies. Written in a clear and accessible style, Crowley's work should find a warm reception from a range of audiences.

Response to Timothy Frye's Review of *Putin's Labor Dilemma: Russian Politics between Stability and Stagnation*

doi:10.1017/S1537592721003662

— Stephen Crowley 



As one would expect, Timothy Frye raises excellent questions. Although there are fewer strikes in Russia than one might expect, when the authorities appease striking workers, why hasn't that encouraged workers elsewhere to follow suit? One answer is that in contrast to the typical experience in the advanced capitalist world—where strikes tend to happen when workers have some leverage, say, when there is increased demand for labor given tight labor markets—most labor protests in Russia take place out of desperation; for example, when wages go unpaid. Without redress, workers will escalate to try to gain media attention,

perhaps on the local or regional level, something that private owners and political officials seek desperately to avoid. Most protests remain localized both because they respond to different conditions in firms and communities and their demands (and potential rewards) are given scant attention.

The absence of effective trade unions is a major reason why protests are not better coordinated: most in Russia are indeed “wildcat.” When protests do spread it is almost always a response to actions by the state that affect otherwise isolated individuals and groups as a single category. A simple increase in taxes for load-bearing trucks, for example, instantly united truck drivers from Dagestan to Chita in opposition.

Although protests can lead to carrots—“appeasement” is the correct term here—protesters themselves, especially ringleaders, can be met with sticks. Whereas the large FNPR labor federation, a “legacy” union left from the Communist period, has long been co-opted, new and alternative unions, often quite militant, are typically repressed. To return to the truckers’ example, their protests gained some concessions, but leaders were dealt with harshly, especially once their demands became overtly political.

Yet repression is not a sufficient explanation. The Belarus protests illustrate why that is so. Belarus under Lukashenko has been even more brutally autocratic than Putin’s Russia—and independent trade unions there have been driven even deeper underground. Yet workers in as many 80 enterprises and workplaces joined the demonstrations against Lukashenko’s clearly fraudulent reelection. Further, imagine the dilemma for the police and militia: it is one thing to be told to use your truncheon against college students said to be infected with Western ideals, but another to be ordered to beat workers in factory uniforms. Arguably, without Russia acting as a backstop, security force defections would likely have cascaded, leading Lukashenko to flee the country.

Frye is certainly correct in pointing to other factors than the fear of labor protest in explaining why Russia remains stuck in the middle-income trap. How one might gauge the relative weight of those factors is a challenging question. The central point I make, as Frye rightly points out, is that Russian labor makes a sizable but overlooked part of any such explanation.

A final point is worth mentioning. Even if, somehow, the Belarus scenario did play out in Russia, with workers joining liberal oppositionists to bring about a “Russia without Putin,” the labor dilemma would remain. Given Russia’s sizable working-class communities, a truly democratic Russia will be difficult to reconcile with the deep economic restructuring some liberal economists envision. Hence, despite the book’s title, the dilemma is Russia’s.

Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin’s

Russia. By Timothy Frye. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. 288p. \$24.95 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S1537592722000044

— Stephen Crowley, *Oberlin College*
scrowley@oberlin.edu



Russia, with Vladimir Putin at the helm, has for some time now been a central focus—one almost might say an obsession—of discussions about US foreign policy, and at times even about internal American politics. From Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014, to claims that Russia “hacked” our elections in 2016, followed by President Trump’s near-adoration of Putin, to the current administration’s view of Russia as part of a “great power competition,” it is no wonder that some pundits have claimed that “it’s Putin’s world now.”

In short, a sober assessment about Russia and Putin has never been more needed. Thankfully, Tim Frye has provided that assessment, and successfully so, one that is written in clear prose and intended for a general audience. It will appeal to a wide readership, including scholars and others who do not focus on Russia but want to know more, political scientists who do focus on Russia and will find the broad survey of research helpful, and students who want to get up to speed on what the field of political science can tell us about Russian politics.

The argument is clear, as spelled out in the full title: although Putin is certainly a strong leader, indeed a “strongman,” there are substantial limits to his power. Those substantial limits suggest a notable contrast to what one would gather from popular discussion, including some discourse from the think tank and policy world. Frye takes on two commonly held views about Russian politics, which he summarizes as “Putinology” and “exceptional Russia.” The former view states that the best way to comprehend Russia is by understanding Putin the person, as a former KGB officer who surrounds himself with like-minded security officials or, in some versions, with fellow conspirators in a kleptocracy. The latter view argues that Russia is doomed by its history and geography to return to autocratic rule. Although at times Frye can set up these arguments as straw figures that are easily knocked down, both are prevalent enough in contemporary discussion to warrant attention.

In their place Frye argues that Putin’s rule is best viewed as a personalistic autocracy, one that—far from being distinct to Russia or Putin—has much in common with Erdoğan’s Turkey, Orbán’s Hungary, or Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. Here, Frye firmly grounds his analysis in the literature of comparative politics, particularly the study of authoritarian rule in which personalist autocracy is one subset.

Frye is most eager to expose the divergence between popular discourse about Russia, including among policy elites, and the work that has been done by political scientists. In this effort, the book is popularizing in the best sense of the word. Frye's analysis remains firmly grounded in empirical findings and is a thorough survey of political science literature, both Western and Russian, on the politics of the country. Thus Frye has provided a considerable credit to the field. As a leading scholar with postings at important research universities in both the United States and Russia, he is well positioned to do so.

Frye's main goal, however, is to explain that, despite how Putin's swagger is often portrayed not only in Russia but also in the Western media, his power is constrained by his blunt instruments of rule, difficult policy trade-offs, and weak state institutions. Relying on the findings of comparative politics, Frye reminds us that similar constraints can be found in several (upper) middle-income countries. In addition, personalistic autocracies have particular dilemmas. Compared with single-party or military dictatorships, personalist autocrats face weaker institutions. Studies show that they are more vulnerable to public protests and to challenges from rival elites. The latter concern leads to greater levels of corruption, which in turn can negatively affect economic growth, increasing the potential for protest. Because there is no institutional mechanism for transferring power, personalistic autocrats can find themselves stuck without an exit ramp, with the tendency to cling to power more tightly. All this rings true for Russia.

In Putin's case his high approval ratings are real (as Frye and colleagues have demonstrated through survey list experiments) but have become something of an obsession. Given much lower approval ratings for other government officials and institutions, they underscore the "personalistic" nature of his rule.

In terms of foreign policy Frye acknowledges that here Russia is truly different, given its imperial legacy, its huge nuclear arsenal, and its seat at the UN Security Council. Yet, although Russia under Putin remains deeply concerned about security in the Eurasian space (often to the detriment of its neighbors), its threat as a military power has been greatly exaggerated: it is vastly outspent by NATO members (even excluding the United States). Moreover, it faces trade-offs in this realm as well; surveys demonstrate that the Russian population is much more interested in social welfare than superpower status. Likewise, Frye corrects the record on the influence of Russian hacking and cyber threats, noting that "few topics have gotten more attention and been less well understood" (p. 176).

In his conclusion Frye provides a concise summary of the trade-offs and dilemmas for autocrats like Putin: "Cheat too much on elections and signal weakness, but cheat too little and risk losing office. Use anti-Westernism

to rile the base, yet not so much that it provokes an actual conflict with the West. Use corruption to reward cronies, though not so much that it stunts economic growth" (p. 200). The same goes for dilemmas over media manipulation, political repression, and reliance on security services. Throughout, while explaining the findings of political science research in plain English, Frye adds colorful anecdotes of his personal experience in Russia, starting with his time serving as a USIA guide in the perestroika-era USSR.

In short, *Weak Strongman* succeeds, and quite well, in what it intends to do. There are inevitably shortcomings, although overcoming them would require that the author go beyond what he set out to do. For one, the political science literature is well surveyed, but we learn little about how Russia might be viewed through other disciplinary lenses, such as history, sociology, or anthropology. Relatedly, although the work of Russian scholars is highlighted, the Russian people themselves appear, if at all, as percentages of respondents to survey questions.

Likewise, although Frye rightly pushes back on the more particularistic—and often intellectually lazy—tropes about Putin and Russia's uniqueness, the narrative can err on the side of portraying contemporary Russia as just one more personalistic autocracy. As Frye points out, "The former Soviet space has proven to be especially fertile ground for this type of government" (p. 39). Why might that be exactly? Explaining a bit more about how the Soviet legacy combined with the cataclysm of the 1990s could deepen the reader's understanding of how Putin became a strongman and why he is faced with some particularly dire trade-offs.

Then again, Frye is right to note that in the contemporary world, personalistic autocracy is having a moment. His analysis pushes us to ask further questions. For one, is personalistic autocracy a policy choice or a historical accident? Interestingly, after explaining in depth why Putin is a personalistic autocrat, Frye concludes—convincingly, I would argue—that were Putin to be removed from power, the political picture in the country might not substantially change. He cites the counterintuitive finding that, in contrast to military dictatorships, personalistic autocracies are much less likely to be replaced by democratic regimes (p. 201).

Further, this leads to the question of why this type of autocratic rule appears prevalent at this point in time (and not only in the former Soviet space). One intriguing hypothesis to explore is whether Putin's style of rule has become a successful Russian export, perhaps somewhat consciously adopted (and adapted) by Hungary's Orbán or Turkey's Erdoğan. A more structural question is why middle-income countries in particular seem to be prone to personalistic rule. Is there something about the "middle-income trap" or, viewed through a different theoretical lens, being stuck in the semi-periphery of global

capitalism, that explains personalistic rule and the appeal of anti-Westernism and illiberalism?

Again, these are questions well beyond the scope of what Frye set out to address. What he has done quite well is to place Putin's Russia in context and to bring the findings of political scientists into the mainstream. Popular discourse about Russia will greatly benefit from the book's wide readership.

Response to Stephen Crowley's Review of *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*

doi:10.1017/S1537592722000056

Q1

— Timothy Frye

I am grateful to Stephen Crowley for his thoughtful review of *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*. Like Crowley, I have long been concerned about the lack of scholarly voices in the national conversation about Russia—a conversation rife with stereotypes and myths and largely bereft of rigorous empirical studies. To this end, the book translates for a general audience the best social science research on Russia while also using many personal anecdotes gathered over 30 years of Russia watching to hold the interest of nonspecialists. It is gratifying that Crowley considers the book a success on these terms.

I also appreciate his encouragement to push the argument further. The book emphasizes the benefits of viewing Russia through the lens of recent research on personalist autocracies, which highlights the many difficult trade-offs inherent in these systems. Crowley applauds this effort but would like more discussion on the roots of this form of government in Russia and elsewhere. Is personalist autocracy a policy choice, a historical accident, or something more systematic? More generally, why are personalist autocracies increasingly prevalent?

These questions go beyond the scope of the book but are precisely the right ones. They are also unlikely to yield easy explanations. Rising economic inequality, global financial crises, changes in the media, policy failures in advanced democracies, increased migration, and autocracy promotion from Moscow and Beijing are likely culprits to one degree or another.

Turning to Russia and Eurasia, Crowley's intuition to look at the impact of the Soviet legacy is a sound one. This may account for the unusually large number of personalist autocracies and the unusually long tenures of personal autocrats in the region. Economic assets also play a role. Personalist autocracies are entrenched in Eurasian countries whose primary economic assets are conducive to authoritarianism, such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, but failed to take deep roots in Eurasian countries with more diverse economies, such as Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, and to a lesser extent Kyrgyzstan. For all their foibles, the latter countries have created more open and competitive political environments for much of the last 30 years.

More broadly, natural resource booms helped bolster personalist autocracy in Venezuela and, to a lesser extent, Bolivia. One might even consider the generous aid given to Belarus by Russia and to Hungary and Poland by the European Union as having effects similar to the resource curse. But this is not much help in accounting for the rise of personalist autocracies in many resource-poor countries like Turkey, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Perhaps the rise of personalist autocracies over the last 30 years simply reflects the demise of one-party and military autocracies, two forms of government that thrived during the Cold War with its emphasis on ideology and generous assistance to military regimes.

These are all topics for future work. And when the academic research on this important topic is done, I hope that someone writes a book for a general audience about their findings.