

# THE RUSSIAN PUZZLE

Review by Mark Melton



Suggesting that the old Soviet Union is as dangerous as the modern Russian Federation would be foolish, not least because modern-day Russia is neither driven by a global ideological agenda nor has the economic strength to afford a global agenda. However, suggesting that Russia poses no risk to global security would also be foolish, and not simply because of its top-tier nuclear arsenal. As Stephen Kotkin argued in the 2016 May-June issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Russia insists on being respected as a great power, despite its great weaknesses, while Putin and other Russian elites have pushed to “make the country ‘relevant,’ come what may.” If accurate, this pushing and rubbing against neighbors, whose citizens can increasingly assert their own agendas, will create considerable risks across multiple regions.

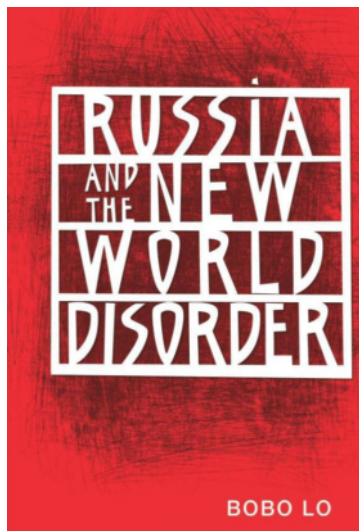
Because Russia remains a significant Eurasian actor, Christian realists who wish to understand the world as it is and make wise

## WINTER IS COMING: WHY VLADIMIR PUTIN & THE ENEMIES OF THE FREE WORLD MUST BE STOPPED

by GARRY KASPAROV—PublicAffairs, 2015, 320 pages.

## RUSSIA & THE NEW WORLD DISORDER

by BOBO LO—Brookings Institution Press/Chatham House, 2015, 336 pages.



policy recommendations must understand this country. Two books, Garry Kasparov’s *Winter is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin & the Enemies of the Free World Must Be Stopped* and Bobo Lo’s *Russia & the New World Disorder*, give contrasting yet enlightening perspectives into Russia’s internal dynamics and foreign policies.

Garry Kasparov, a Russian activist and former chess champion, explains in *Winter is Coming* the wider dynamics, starting at the end of the Cold War, that allowed Vladimir Putin to con-

trol a kleptocratic, mafia-style government. Arguing against the Russian “humiliation myth”, Kasparov relates how Western democracies bankrolled the collapsing Soviet Union with billions of dollars to prevent its collapse when they could have advocated for human rights (6-9, 27-30). Foolishly hoping for a more cooperative relationship that never came, multiple American presidents from both parties ignored atrocities and human rights violations instead of speaking truth to the Russian people (50-58, 80-81, 156-158, 209-211). Once democratic checks had been dismantled, Russian oligarchs perfected kleptocracy, and Putin emerged as a mafia-style “*capo di tutti capi*” who sidelined noncompliant oligarchs and now enables others to rob Russians’ wealth. Public theft became the state’s *raison d’être*. Complicit in these crimes because they accept the ill-gotten wealth (e.g., letting oligarchs make deposits into Western banks), Westerners still enable Putin to purchase the support he needs. As long as oligarchs can keep their wealth in Western banks that are protected by the rule of law, there

is no need to revolt (158-165, 205-208). Meanwhile, everyday Russians cannot challenge Putin peacefully or even organize against him.

In response to the widely-held belief that Putin is popular at home, Kasparov says, “The entire definition of approval and popularity of a democratic leader has no application in an autocracy. When there is only one restaurant in town and it has only one item on the menu, and no other restaurants are allowed to open, is it popular?” He also asserts that if Putin was truly popular, he would not need to rig elections, eliminate rivals, or attack a single protestor in a town square (180-181).

In addition to witty writing, one of *Winter is Coming*'s great strengths is Kasparov's personal, on-the-ground perspective as a Russian activist, and his stories give context to events that would otherwise appear as historical footnotes. However, the book mostly “preaches to the choir” without trying to convert those realists willing to ignore human rights violations. Kasparov only briefly argues that supporting Russian democracy would improve global stability, but his argument is too brief and overlooks easy counterarguments (262). Elsewhere, Kasparov suggests Russia “exports corruption” that weakens democracies (158-159, 161-162, 205). This could make for an interesting line of attack, but again the argument is too ineffective.

Whereas Kasparov's anger against Putin leaps from the page while he deplores Russia's internal kleptocracy and autocracy, Bobo Lo's *Russia & the New World Disorder* concentrates calmly on the country's foreign policies. Though lacking Kasparov's entertaining

op-ed writing style, Lo's book is a denser, more informative work that immensely rewards readers who have the patience to delve deeply. Currently an associate fellow at the Russia & Eurasia Programme at Chatham House in the UK and a former deputy head of mission at the Australian Embassy in Moscow, he provides fascinating insights into the many problems Russia will face in the emerging “new world disorder”.

His analysis rejects many popular Western and Russian myths about the country, but it does carefully examine how a troubled history and vulnerable geography have created a unique, antagonistic mindset that will outlast Putin (16-22, 179). Through this Eurasian vision, Russian elites feel a strategic entitlement that requires other great powers to respect Russia's exceptionalism on any issue deemed important (17, 134). From its rightful great-power position in a multipolar, polycentric order, Russia can maintain global stability while serving as a balancer between a declining United States and a rising China (xvi, 39-40). Smaller countries are irrelevant actors, pawns without their own agendas or agency. Through this mindset, Russian elites cannot believe countries like Georgia or Ukraine would revolt against their wishes without American backing or support. Most troubling, these elites view geopolitics as zero-sum, with their country either triumphant or humiliated (40-47). Win-win settlements or sustainable compromises for crises in Ukraine, Syria, or elsewhere are thus undesirable unless they somehow humiliate the West.

However, as Lo reasons, this Russian mindset—largely based upon a retro-vision of the Con-

cert of Europe—ignores realities on the ground. Expanding globalization has spread technology that has undermined state power, and military strength without soft power has become less effective and can even be counterproductive (xvii). Yes, countries like China have grown stronger relative to the West, but the rising tide of prosperity and technology has raised all ships, not just China. Many smaller nations, including several of Russia's neighbors, have become stronger and can assert their own agendas (53-56, 62-63). A multitude of new relevant actors on the global stage also means that many long-ignored issues, such as water security, may be addressed. Yet finding solutions will require inclusive, multilateral negotiations that Russia has tended to loathe because it cannot dominate them (65). This emerging “new world disorder” could disrupt all existing powers, including the United States, but Russia is especially vulnerable because it has proven unwilling and unable to adapt for multiple reasons.

Russia's overreliance on military strength without soft power partially explains why it has struggled to adapt, as the Ukraine crisis demonstrates. Though many Westerners consider the Ukrainian invasion a genius masterstroke, Lo insists Putin and his elites miscalculated greatly. Originally, Russia could have done nothing and allowed Ukraine to toy with moving towards the European Union. Eventually, Ukrainian elites and European bureaucrats would have grown tired of each other. Then Russia could have reasserted itself over all of Ukraine without spending blood and treasure. Now, however, the invasion means Ukrainians will move towards Europe, even

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when both sides get frustrated with each other (216-217).

Moreover, Lo argues global leaders in the new world disorder gain respect by resolving global problems, whereas oftentimes Russia's goal is not solving geopolitical crises but simply getting to the talks and thus receiving respect (xvii, 50, 72, 140). While Russia has proven its ability to break things, it has not proven its ability to fix them on a reliable basis (57, 99, 128-129). In one case where Lo maintains Russia did contribute positively, by helping remove Assad's chemical weapons from Syria, he says that Russia's motivation was not to promote peace but to constrain the United States (211). The same could probably be said for Russia's military intervention in Syria, but those events occurred after the book was published. In the future, Russia may contribute positively to other global crises while trying to counter the West, but according to Lo's account,

expecting this contribution on a regular basis would be unwise.

Overall, *Russia & the New World Disorder* paints a depressing picture. Believing Putin has been successful, the Russian elites see little reason to change course, so the country will likely reject reforms (203-204). Lo extrapolates, "A Russia that fails to adapt to the demands of the new world disorder will remain backward, in comparison not only with the developed West, but also with a rising non-West. It would be less actor than acted upon, unable to defend its interests against the competing agendas of others" (208). Given this forecast, it can be easy to foresee how—despite its military strengths—Russia could become the "Sick Man of Eurasia", spreading the contagion of disorder across multiple regions.

Though more details could have been given about how and why the "new world disorder" developed, Lo offers readers a

multitude of insights that are worth digesting slowly and reading twice. Plus, the lessons can be applied not only to Russia but also to the United States, who must handle changing geopolitics as well. Compared to *Winter is Coming*, *Russia & the New World Disorder* is more rewarding for readers already somewhat familiar with Russia, and it would make for an ideal text for a university course.

Much more should be said about both books—including how the authors view NATO's expansion in the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church's influence, and so forth. To read longer reviews for each of these books and others about Russia, check [ProvidenceMag.com](http://ProvidenceMag.com) over the summer. P

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