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BOOK REVIEW: ALL THE KREMLIN'S MEN

Jozef Lenč*

ZYGAR, M.: *Všetci mocní Kremľa*. [All the Kremlin's Men.] Krásno nad Kysucou: Absynt, 2016. 467 p. ISBN 978-80-89845-83-5.

In 2007, the *Time* magazine labelled **Vladimír Putin** as the person of the year. Vigorous and at that time relatively young Russian president (in comparison with his predecessors from Soviet times), leader of one of the world superpowers was pictured as undaunted “military and political leader of the world”. In the course of few years, nothing unfamiliar for Putin.

In this stylized position of some “Messiah” and decisive leader, he is seen as such by many Russians who remember the old faded glory of USSR with nostalgia. Paradoxically, the same perception share the right-wing extremists within EU states. In many perspectives analogical view on **Vladimír Putin** have those who regard him as the biggest current security threat and arrogant ruler who jeopardizes free and democratic world.

His almost fatal attraction was noticed by Slovak publishing house Absynt, which since 2015 has been introducing the best contributions of current reportage literature not only from today's Russia. It is clear that Russia and its president are attractive and enigmatic at the same time for Slovak reader. Moreover, in many aspects Russia is incomprehensible or hardly comprehensible country. Already since 19th Century, a certain part of Slovak public as well as some politicians look with hope towards Russia, often without any knowledge about interests of Russian political elites and without understanding the development of Russian politics.

Thanks to Absynt several publications, which analyse current Russian society (particularly books written by **Svetlana Alexievich**) who had to, but did (not) manage to cope with the fall of USSR, were published in Slovakia. The publishing of the book of **Mikhail Zygar** *All the Kremlin's Men* as well

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contributed to better understanding of Russian policy. **M. Zygar**, a young journalist, author and filmmaker, experienced the work of a reporter and political commentator. In 2008, together with **Valery Panyushkin**, he wrote the book *Gazprom: The New Russian Weapon* and a year ago in Russia he published his most recent book *All the Kremlin's Men* which caused a lot of sensation. Zygar tried to explain *"the metamorphosis of Vladimir Putin: how and why he transformed from liberal pro-Western president of the 21st Century to authoritarian ruler and one of the most significant opponents of the West."* (Zygar 2016, p. 6) To assemble the mosaic of the story, he used many documents, interviews with different people from Putin's surroundings and a lot of facts and information, which he obtained during his journalist career.

The book is divided into five parts, which illustrate fifteen years of **V. Putin** in Russian politics. Years during which Russia and its president have grown together and influenced each other. In twenty chapters, he tried to explain the social-power phenomenon of current Russian president, yet not focusing the entire story on **Vladimír Putin** only. The mosaic is composed of his close fellows (**Voloshin, Medvedev, Surkov, Shuvalov, Sechin, Volodin, Peskov, Schoygu** and **Kudrin**), some foreign politicians – vassals or enemies (**Obama, Saakashvili** and **Assad**), Russian oligarchs (**Berezovsky, Khodorkovsky**), Ukrainian ally (**Medvedchuk**), home "muzhiks" (**Kadyrov**) and hard-line opponents (**Navalny**).

The choice was not made by random. According to **Zygar**, all of them have somehow co-formed Putin's personality. Their life stories, which author introduces in the beginning of every chapter together with specific political and non-political decisions in particular situations, have transformed Russia and **Putin**. There is an interesting statement in the introduction of the book which contradicts the popular perception of the phenomenon that everything that happens (not only) in Russian policy is a result of rational selection and long-term planning. *"Fifteen years or even more of the Russian history does not have a clear logic. The chain of events, which I managed to connect shows that not even Putin nor his collective had a plan or strategy. Everything that happens is only a tactical step, an operational reaction on external stimulus which does not lead to any final goal."* (p.8)

The first part is called Putin I. the Lionheart. It is divided into three chapters in which author gradually introduces the political beginnings of Vladimír Putin. Starting with his arrival to Moscow and ending with the moment when *"young, not known Chekist and former right hand of Anatoly Sobchak"* (p. 20) became

the president of the Russian Federation. In the chapter about Alexander Voloshin, author analyses the events in the last months of Yeltsin's era. He focuses on Voloschin's attitude towards communists, which helped to the rise of influence of liberals on Yeltsin's Family (*Semja*) who had “*disproportionally big influence within the state and in business*” (p. 18) and on the “Operation Successor”, which got out of hands. In the following chapters, he focuses on **Boris Berezovsky** and **Mikhail Khodorkovsky**, pointing on the naivety of Russian oligarchs who believed **Putin** would be a second **Yeltsin** – powerless and their puppet. However, close bonds to the FSB structures and international political events (Chechnya, Iraq etc.) caused their loss of business, freedom and the disappearance of *Semja*. New elite of long-term Putin's friends (from FSB and KGB) entered the stage.

In the second part Putin II. the Magnificent author analyses concerns of Kremlin caused by events in the close neighbourhood (especially in Ukraine) and the formation of new centre of power. In the chapter about **Dmitri Medvedev** the author describes the euphoria of the first years which “*Russia passed as if it were in trance. No politics, no public life only total hedonism.*” (p. 119) This time was enjoyed particularly by Putin's oligarchs - **Abramovich, Prochorov, Potanin or Deripaska** – but also by Putin's children like **Ramzan Kadyrov** or **Xenia Sobchak**. **Viktor Medvedchuk** is the protagonist of the chapter concerning Ukraine, its politics and Russian failure that scarred relations between Russia and the West. In the third chapter, he describes the concerns of Moscow about the so-called colour revolutions. The protagonist is **Vladislav Surkov** who made everything possible to tighten the Russian political system against any attempt to create similar revolution in Russia. In the chapter about **Igor Shuvalov** he focuses on Russian effort to use the fear of European states from energy security to gain their loyalty. Furthermore, in the chapter 8 he describes the naivety of **Sergei Ivanov** who believed for a time he will be Putin's successor.

The third part of the book presents the causes of Russian geopolitical retirement. The name **Czarevich Dmitry** shows the fact that even though **Dmitry Medvedev** fulfilled the expectations about being a president without bigger political ambitions and about withdrawing from the candidature in favour of **Putin**, by his pro-Western policy ultimately supported the growing fear of **Putin** about the West trying to weaken and submit Russia. The chapter about Georgian president **Saakashvili** reveals the reasons behind Russian intervention in Georgia and real position of president Medvedev. “*When*

Saakashvili called to Moscow to have a conversation with the new colleague, he was connected to Putin. Twice. "What has Medvedev to do with this?" This was according to Saakashvili the response of the new Russian prime minister. "You have to speak with me, Mikheil Nikolaevich, relations with Georgia are within my area of competence." (p. 215) Besides Georgia, author analyses also Medvedev's failure in Ukraine. Russian effort to punish the initiators of colour revolutions failed. Putin's aversion to the West strengthened. Chapter 10 describes the effort of president **Obama** to restart the relations with **Putin** and the reality that he finally became his archenemy. "An old tradition from times of Politburo proved to be true, that Moscow can find common ground with the Republicans but never with the Democrats." (p. 235)

In the second half of the story about Prince **Medvedev**, **Zygar** analyses two different events which determine current Russia. The rise of **Igor Sechin**, on the outside a humble civil servant who in reality is friend of Putin and *spiritual leader of Russian siloviki*, and unsuccessful efforts of **Tatyana Yumasheva** (daughter of **Yeltsin**) and **Alexei Navalny** to prevent Putin's effort to become president again and to strengthen the power of his structures.

The part called Putin III. the Terrible describes the re-assumption of power and final refusal of democracy and of liberalism attempts. Marxism-Leninism is replaced by Orthodox Church, which is described in the chapter about patriarch **Kirill**. "Russian president considered orthodox to be a perfect national idea which connects the Russian nation better than any political party." (p. 320) An important part was played by **Vyacheslav Volodin** and **Dmitry Peskov** who understood the fact that the liking from the West is useless. Reader can obtain information about inspiration to get Sochi Olympic Games and about the Russian resistance to Maidan in Kiev. There are many interesting stories about those who rose in power ladder (**Sergey Shoygu**) and those who eventually finished in disgrace (**Alexei Kudrin**). In the conclusion, **Zygar** analyses father-like relationship between **Putin** and **Ramzan Kadyrov** and the expectations of Bashar **al-Assad**. "Asad was waiting and hoped Russia would stop pretending to be a normal Western democracy and would become a normal east type tyranny... would stop to be ashamed for selling rockets to Syria and Iran." (p. 441)

In the last part Putin IV. the Saint author connects the findings about the moloch called **Putin**. He points out that the book could include many others who eventually formed and are forming current Russian policy - Putin's projection. He explains the reasons behind Russian distrust to USA and the West and the

reasons of metamorphosis that took place in Russian politics between 1999 and 2015. He claims: *“it was not Putin who brought Russia to its current state, he resisted this metamorphosis for a long time but finally he submitted and understood that this way it is easier.”* (p. 467)

Zygar's book *All the Kremlin's Men* is a book about Russian politics. It is a book about the machinery, which has evolved from first days of democracy (1991) through wild privatisation and the effort of the “Family” to gain the power in the country, to the final creation of power mechanism called “Putin”. The book tells a story about Ukraine, Georgia, and about political mistakes and failures of the West and about politicians who can be easily bought and, often with a good intention, they do worse things than expected. It is also about us who are trying to have a good picture about Russia and **Putin** because *“all of us have created our own Putin. But it seems that he won't be the last one.”* (p. 467)

Zygar's book is not strictly a political or a sociological study about Russian politics and society but it offers a decipherable and plastic view of Russia. It is a book about political strategy, which does not exist, and about improvisation, which often administers our world.