

Mark Galeotti: We Need to Talk about Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong

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The Russian president Vladimir Putin is one of the most well-known politicians in the world. The fact that he has held power for already two decades, his distinctive personal presentation and his antagonism towards Western states have contributed to the attention to and interest in him of a multitude of scholars and public commentators. The need to understand Putin's personality became even more urgent after the Ukraine crisis in 2014, when Russia started to openly clash with Western democracies. This event led to a significant increase in the production of books, articles and commentaries aiming to explain the Russian president and the system he created. Unfortunately, quantity does not equal quality, and some academics grew ever more frustrated by the fact that the debate about the Russian president is filled with clichés, rumours and stereotypes. The feeling that Putin has become a “Rorschach inkblot test” (p. 3) into which it is possible to project our own fears, expectations and frustrations led the author Mark Galeotti to decide to write this book, which explains who the Russian president really is.

For those familiar with the author, who is a Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute and a Senior Non-Resident Fellow of the Institute of International Relations Prague, it is hardly surprising that he decided to write this book. Not only has Galeotti dedicated nearly all of his academic career to studying and understanding modern Russia, but he has also acquired a remarkable network of contacts on the ground due to frequent visits there. Therefore, although his primary interest is in organized crime (which he described in *The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia*) and security policy (which is discussed in his book *Russian Political War: Moving beyond the Hybrid*) he is capable of providing insightful comments on all kinds of political developments in this country. Moreover, he does not limit himself to the academic debate, but via various means (including the podcast *In Moscow's Shadows*), aims to reach out and educate a broader audience. Galeotti's commentaries are usually not only readable and comprehensible, but also concrete, since their author is not afraid to put himself up against the myths and misconceptions present in the public debate. Probably the most noteworthy example of this is his criticism of the so-called Gerasimov doctrine, which was summarized in the article “I'm Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’”. In this article, Galeotti questions the existence of the overarching strategic document guiding Russian influence operations. At the same time, he shows significant self-reflection and contemplates his role in creating this myth since he was probably the first to use the term “Gerasimov doctrine”.

The aforementioned characteristics of the author are also significantly visible in his book about Putin. The publication is insightful, readable and bold in its challenge of various misconceptions. In fact, as the author states in his introduction, the unsatisfactory state of the public debate about the Russian president (and Russia in general) was one of the important motivating factors for his writing this publication. Galeotti's goal is to address this problem and provide a more nuanced and complex view on Vladimir Putin's personality and how the current Russian state functions. His book is thus not dedicated – as the author himself acknowledges – to an academic audience, but instead aims to reach out to the broader public. It is likely for this reason that the publication is not only relatively short, but also further separated into eleven chapters that are dedicated to various features of Putin's personality and the regime he builds. These individual sections of the book do not strongly relate to each other and, in fact, could stand alone as short commentaries on particular topics. Even though the chapters are different in their lengths and topics, their styles are quite similar. They all start from misconceptions – such as Putin's alleged desire to restore the USSR, or the notion that the most important feature of Putin's personality is that he was a KGB agent – and then proceed to debunk them and present the author's point of view on the given matter. The author heavily utilizes his personal experience from Russia as well as his detailed knowledge of local events and the Russian environment in his argumentation. Their interpretation tends to be much more important for him than general theories or concepts aiming to explain the Russian political system. Some might dismiss this style of argumentation as too subjective and prone to bias, but it makes the book significantly more engaging. Furthermore, it deserves respect that the author is not afraid to take a clear stance and state his perspective on Putin's personality, motivations and role in the Russian political system.

So how does Galeotti see Putin? First and foremost, his view is complex and nuanced. It is quite remarkable that a book which is so accessible, short and readable does not give the reader easy answers, but rather forces him to think harder and to not fall into the trap of simplifications. For the author, Putin is not that important as a person, but rather as a product of various influences of the context within which he found himself. A Soviet citizen, a KGB operative, an intermediary between the official and unofficial power structures in Saint Petersburg in the wild 1990s, the ruler of a hardly governable state or a man seeking to make his mark in history. All

these roles and contexts are considered while the author contemplates Putin's views, attitudes and actions. This careful analysis prevents the author from normative judgments, and instead draws a picture of a person whose actions are in some way comprehensible and logical given the personal history and context which formed the man. From a structural perspective, the book is not necessarily about Putin as a person, but rather about the Russian political system and its recent history. This bird's eye view which appears in most of the chapters makes the book even more relevant and enriching.

For instance, the chapter about Putin's career in the KGB can then serve as a bridge to the author's comment on the situation of the Russian secret services, and their role within the political regime. Galeotti starts with several examples illustrating that the Russian president considers the secret services an essential part of the state apparatus. He tries to explain this worldview by looking back at Putin's youth in the Soviet Union, where spies were celebrated and mythologized. The chapter continues by deconstructing the myth of Putin as a spymaster by pointing to his mediocre career in the KGB and considering the influences of the other positions he held in the 1990s on his personality and political style. After describing Putin's personal features, the author applies a broader perspective and considers what the inclination of the president to secret services means for Russian politics. The author concludes that it gives them significant leverage over the man in the chief position and they can navigate his decisions by providing him with just the "right" information. The book repeats this approach in other chapters, and so it can give unexpected remarks on areas such as Putin's geopolitical strategy, or his approach to the management of the state, ideology or relations with his associates or Russian society.

Of course, this ambition to comment on a wide variety of subjects has its flaws. The argumentation in the chapters is indeed well-thought out, supported by various examples and ultimately avoidant of definitive conclusions. However, since basically, each paragraph might serve as a topic for a research project in its own right, a more knowledgeable reader (who is truly not a member of the primary audience for the book) might feel that some arguments are too rushed and should be discussed in more detail. This is especially the case with the highlighted "*most common and most problematic myths*" (p. 5), which serve as an entry point for the development

of the author's counterarguments and analysis. Unfortunately, their origin and development and the reasons as to why these myths resonate are not really discussed.

Similarly, these misconceptions are still only vaguely defined and not attributed to any specific person or institution. The sole exception is Galeotti's discussion of Timothy Snyder's characterization of the philosopher Ivan Ilyin as a fascist in the book *The Road to Unfreedom* (pp. 70–71). Otherwise, Galeotti simply claims that these are the most resonant myths and starts his argumentation without further analysis of their creation and dissemination in the public debate. However, by (acknowledgedly) fighting "*straw man arguments and oversimplifications*" (p. 5) the author misses the opportunity to educate the reader about the mechanisms and ethics of academic research. This would provide him with a toolkit allowing him to spot myths that are yet to come. Indeed, doing so might make the book less readable and would require significant additional research. Nonetheless, it would be worth undertaking, since it would help to address another problem that Galeotti briefly highlights in the introduction: the simplification and vulgarization of the public debate surrounding complex socio-political challenges.

Galeotti is known for providing not only insightful comments on the Russian situation, but also for his ability to formulate specific policy recommendations. Unfortunately, the book is quite minimalistic in this regard, and except for a few final pages, there is not that much said about the implications of Putin's personality for the strategy that Western states and leaders should apply in their dealings with Russia. Similarly, not much attention is paid to possible developments after the departure of the current Russian president and the impact of his legacy. This is unfortunate since adding an extra chapter on this issue would be entirely in line with the emphasis of the book on the context that formed Putin. A conclusion covering this topic might help bring the book to a proper closure, which is needed since the ending of the book arrives quite abruptly with a chapter about Putin's possible departure from power.

Despite these unused possibilities, the book remains an excellent piece of literature that could be recommended to anyone interested in Russia or modern geopolitics. To those who are unfamiliar with these topics, it can provide a captivating and accessible, but still nuanced and

complex, insight into the ways in which Russian politics operate. For academics and other experts, the book provides a handful of interesting points that they can challenge or use as the starting point in their own research or analysis. For the latter, the book might (and should) also serve as an example to follow. This is so mainly since the rise of myths about Putin and Russia has been (up to a certain extent) caused by the inability of academics to (in)form the public debate by their comments and insights. Without a doubt, this task is getting more challenging in the current era of information overload, social media and political polarization. However, these hardships do not absolve experts of the responsibility for shaping the public debate and, consequently, policy. Galeotti's book should also be seen within this context, as another attempt to cultivate the debate we are having and the way in which we think about the world around us. Hopefully, his example will motivate more academics to find ways to contribute to the public debate. This is very much needed since in the complicated world of today, there are many other topics we need to discuss than simply Putin.

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Steven Blockmans and Sophia Russack (eds.): Representative Democracy in the EU: Recovering Legitimacy

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The European Union (EU) is in a crisis. Democratic freedoms in Europe have not been faced with such a level of strain since the end of the Cold War. Authoritarian forces have been gaining a significant amount of support and political power in the last ten years, both globally and in the Union's member states. The number of attacks on freedom of press and media, and the silencing and murders of journalists in Europe are shockingly unprecedented. At the same time, the European debt crisis and the refugee crisis have drawn new lines of division across the continent; the concrete impact of these shifts was first felt in the Brexit referendum in 2016 and continues to see expanding legislative repercussions, most recently in Poland and Hungary. Given the post-national character of the recent crises, *Representative Democracy in the EU: Recovering Legitimacy* (2019) seeks to analyse "how representative [...] national parliaments [are] in their decision-making on EU matters" (p. 5). In the following review I first present all the obligatory information surrounding the book. Because the book is quite broad, I then present its main arguments and content only in an abstract manner. I offer a summary critique of the book from a sociological perspective on EU studies and discuss its contribution to the larger academic debate.

The volume was edited by Steven Blockmans and Sophia Russack, both researchers at the *Centre for European Policy Studies* (CEPS), a think tank specializing in European Union affairs. Published in 2019, it is a collaboration with 20 other think tanks from the *European Policy Institutes Network* (EPIN) and co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The 36 contributors are all experts on EU affairs and the countries they focus on, with the majority of them conducting research in their respective countries. This localisation of analysis represents one of the book's main strengths in terms of factual information, but also contributes to its synthetical limitations (which I discuss in more detail later).

As part of the *Towards a Citizens' Union* (2CU) project, it constitutes the second book in a three-book series. The first volume concluded that citizens' interest in direct democracy has increased as a result of past crises. The book under review focuses on the state of political structures in the EU, specifically on the national parliaments of the member states and their degree of 'Europeanization', the relationship between them and EU-level bodies, and the state of democracy at the EU level. Drawing on the findings of the first two books, the third volume proposes how to counter populism and

enhance democracy with the underlying assumption that democracy can be improved by balancing direct and representative democratic processes.

The point of departure for the book is the notion that the European Union cannot react in a fast and efficient manner to recent crises (such as the Euro Crisis and the migration crisis); citizens feel inadequately represented and have low trust in EU institutions, enabling the rise of populism in wide parts of the Union. Steven Blockmans thus argues that representative democracy currently faces “*a crisis of both efficiency and legitimacy*” (p. 2). Framed by an introductory and a concluding chapter by Stephen Blockmans, the book consists of three thematic parts. Part I is dedicated to “Transversal Aspects and Thematic Issues”, starting with Dídac Gutiérrez-Peris and Héctor Sánchez Margalef, who identify challenges, limitations and opportunities for representative democracy today (CHAPTER 2). They conclude that national governments are currently struggling to address local consequences (such as the rise of illiberalism and loss of faith in democracy) of global processes (e.g. geopolitical struggles or post-national issues). In Chapter 3 Daniel Smilov and Antoinette Primatarova challenge how effectively Voting Aid Applications (VAAs) manage to address low voter turnout in EU elections. They find that VAAs are unable to mobilise non-voters and thus fail to address the low voter turnout in EU elections, but rather make information about European politics more accessible to citizens – albeit, they note, the information provided tends to be somewhat abstract and misleading.

In Part II of the book, Sophia Russack brings the analysis to the “EU level.” While the European Parliament (EP) has expanded its influence, responsibilities and scope of action, this development has not been reciprocated in the EP elections, which experienced unprecedentedly low voter turnouts in 2014. She argues that the reason many EU citizens feel confused by EU institutions and consequently don’t vote is that the European Parliament and national parliaments are built from “*different constitutional DNA*” (p. 52). Russack sees especially the Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidate) system, “*a national institutional practice that has been applied to the EU level in the expectation of similar positive effects, while ignoring the different setting of the EU*” (p. 57), as exemplary for her argument.

The chapter provides the transition into Part III of the book, the 14 individual Country Reports representing 13 out of the 27 EU member states and the United Kingdom. One of the book’s strengths is the variety

of the country reports, as they deal with countries from all European regions, and provide a concise overview of the regional differences in the EU. The authors point out how beneath the surface not everything works as well as generally perceived, like Denmark's parliamentary EU scrutiny or Italy's 'perfect bicameral system'. They also shed light on focal points of past and contemporary crises, like Greece and Poland, and epicentres of both Euroscepticism (Czech Republic) and further Europeanisation (Latvia).

This part of the book argues that the Europeanisation of national debates is an uneven process, both EU-wide and within the parliaments themselves (as the upper houses are generally more active in EU matters); EU matters are politicised only to a low degree and the relationship between the national level, the EU and the voter is often unclear and in some cases even non-transparent for citizens. Instruments of the parliaments to influence EU policies largely exist but are either not used to their full potential or misused entirely. Furthermore, the structure of the EU itself favours the European Council and governmental positions over the parliaments and thus often undermines parliamentary efforts. To exemplify, I would like to just point to two of these reports, which represent both 'the new' and 'the old' EU, namely the Czech Republic and Denmark.

In their chapter on the Czech Republic, Jan Kovář, Petr Kratochvíl and Zdeněk Sychra analyse the disconnect of Czech parliamentary democracy and the EU level. The authors give a concise overview of the two chambers of the Czech parliament, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, both of which have a committee dedicated to EU affairs. However, the Chamber's committee does not discuss its decisions with the entire plenary, and what is more problematic, membership in the committee is seen as a 'last resort' for parliamentarians as the Czech public is so Eurosceptic that dedication to EU matters does not bring electoral benefits. In the Senate, on the other hand, EU affairs are discussed more in depth and resolutions require a plenary vote to be adopted, but the Senate holds less power than the Chamber and is generally perceived as unnecessary. The authors conclude that this institutional setting undermines any efforts from politicians to get more involved in EU matters and as a result there is a clear divide and hierarchy between the national and the EU in Czech politics. They note that the disconnect between the national and the EU level "*not only causes problems in promoting Czech interests in the EU,*

it also has significant impact on the perception of European issues in the Czech Parliament, especially in the Chamber” (P. 125), essentially reinforcing the already prevalent Euroscepticism.

Maja Kluger Dionigi takes on the convention of Danish parliamentary practice as a “*textbook example of parliamentary control*” (P. 129) over EU matters. She argues that while it is true that Denmark’s tradition of minority governments and its specific mandate-based system have given the parliament a strong hold over the government’s EU stance, the Danish model is far from perfect. For one, the mandate system limits Danish EU politics to its specific committee in the parliament, possibly leading to a lack of expertise on specific matters. Moreover, the debates on EU issues are largely depoliticised as the government makes sure to gain support from the pro-EU parts of the parliament, thereby constituting a lack of plural opinions. The author concludes that in practice the national and the EU structures are not as compatible as in theory and this incompatibility undermines the parliament’s chances to influence EU policies, resulting in a lot of early agreements and mandates given on incomplete information.

In the limited space of this review it is unfortunately not possible to engage with more of the country reports. Nonetheless, all of them are important and timely reads, whether one as a reader reads only selected chapters according to one’s own interest or the book as a whole. While the chapters are similar enough to contain a common thread, the book escapes the tendency to become repetitive with some chapters breaking up the strict polity focus. Worth mentioning here is especially the country report on Poland, but also Chapter 2 on the current challenges of democracy and Chapter 3 on Voting Aid Applications. The wide range of authors offers quality insight and analysis, especially considering that they are not only experts on EU matters but can also draw on their own experience of living and researching in the selected countries. This serves especially to give countries in the ‘peripheral’ regions of Europe a voice and circumvents a common shortfalling seen in similar works that offer predominantly Western views on the rest of Europe. However, it should be said that the width of the book is a double-edged sword: because it so ambitiously presents half of the EU’s members, the book cannot go into as much detail as desired, at times leaving the reader with a number of follow-up questions, and at other times making the reports somewhat indistinguishable from each other.

In the end Steven Blockmans concludes that there is a divide in Europe running not between the Northern and Southern, or the Eastern and Western countries, but rather “*between those systems in which citizens feel represented and those in which they do not*” (p. 359). Unfortunately, this is where the book falls short. It would need a more interpretive, overarching conclusion to tie all three parts, but especially the individual country reports together – what exactly are the recurring issues that national parliaments face when they have to make decisions on EU matters? One point, for example, would be the problem of time that some of the authors picked up on: decisions on EU-wide policies often have to be made on relatively short notice and thus cannot be discussed in detail in the parliaments, providing an obstacle in the democratic process. Another point would be how national discussions of EU matters are often framed in domestic terms, and it would have been interesting and beneficial if the authors had elaborated more on this argument, since it is a collective, but at the same time individual issue. ‘Framing in domestic terms’ inherently applies to a different context in the Czech Republic than it does in the UK or Austria.

The editors claim to “*focus[...] on polity rather than policy or populism*” (p. 6); however, they do not actually cover polity in its entirety. Instead they only discuss the technical aspects of polity, limiting the discussion to the question of political structures of the EU and electoral law. Approaching this topic from a sociological background, I do not agree that the current crisis is predominantly a crisis of the legitimacy and efficiency of representative democracy. I rather believe that it is a “*multi-level legitimacy crisis*” (VAN APELDOORN 2009). I think it could be rather misleading to isolate political structures from the political process as a whole as is done here, and I do not agree that the EU’s crisis can be resolved simply through the implementation of more elements of direct democracy. Direct democracy is not an end unto itself but is accompanied by its own risks. These make it necessary to analyse its relationship with populism in the age of media democracy in greater depth.

By taking such an approach the book reflects the problems it fails to address. Namely it focusses on technical matters while disregarding substantial concerns (be they economic inequalities across the Union, or issues of national and collective identities or values, to name just a few such concerns), and the reactions to these shortcomings (populism). In that way it runs the risk of reproducing those problems. Structure and content go

hand in hand; they both constitute each other and at the same time determine politics as a process. With this in mind, it is questionable whether the problems identified in the country reports – namely the inefficiency of national governments in standing up to global forces, the discrepancy of national and EU structures, and the framing of EU debates in domestic terms – would be fixed by implementing more elements of direct democracy. In any case, I would say that this book is a valuable contribution to a larger interdisciplinary debate on the future of the EU and should be recognised as such by a professional audience.

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