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Book Review: *Putin Country*

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin has been the president of the Russian Federation since May of 2012, but he has been Russia's effective head of state for close to 16 years now. This is because Putin and his current Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev have been alternating roles of President and Prime Minister since Medvedev's election and subsequent appointment of Putin as PM in 2008. Prior to this, Putin served as President for his first term from 2000 to 2008 following the resignation of Boris Yeltsin. Putin's tenure as Russia's *de facto* leader has brought economic prosperity to the country and a renewed sense of national pride following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but Russia has also grown increasingly authoritarian during this time. Since much of the international focus on Russia has been centered on its metropolises like Moscow, former National Public Radio foreign correspondent Ann Garrels decided to take a different perspective on the country in her book *Putin Country: A Journey into the Real Russia. Putin Country* provides critical look at the impact that Putin's economic and authoritarian measures have had on the particular town of Chelyabinsk in rural Russia.

Coming into the book, I always imagined that there is still a strong sense of longing for the old Soviet Union in modern Russia, especially among older folks who vividly remember what life was like during this period and among rural communities who benefitted the most from the Soviet Union's insatiable industrial and military machines. In class, we also learned that while there is a strong collective identity, there remains a distinct division between being merely a Russian citizen (*Rossiiskii*) and an ethnic

Russian (*Russkii*) (Scarffe). Yet this book revealed a deeper ethnic division than I had imagined. Russian migration officials themselves have "openly expressed their disgust with the 'pollution' of their country by non-Slavic immigrants" (Garrels 58). While Russian state media has made a point of exposing racial divides in the US, they have largely ignore the own ethnic divide within their own country.

This nationalism has even seeped into Russian state universities, where Chelyabinsk State University history professor Alexandr Fokin says that "nationalists and so-called patriots exert an influence on what he can research and what he can say in the classroom. . . . [T]he youth wing of Putin's United Russia party has publicly named some professors it deems traitorous" (33). The university also forced Fokin to “sign a document confirming his refusal to share secrets with his foreign colleagues,” yet the definition of what “secret” means is vaguely defined.

Much like during Soviet times, the state media has gone out of their way to blame the West—particularly, the United States—for the internal woes faced by Russia rather than focus on the corruption of its political and business leaders. Garrels argues that "Given Russia’s economic challenges and failure to modernize. . . . Putin is seeking out enemies abroad to cover up problems at home” (35). Some Russians hold that the United States acted unfaithfully by "taking advantage" of their country's weakness in the 1990s. In recent times, they have cited the expansion of NATO military capabilities in countries bordering Russia as well as the as the Wests intervention and involvement in the crises in both Ukraine and Syria as proof of the West's trickery aimed against Russia and her people. Many outside observes—and even some within Russia itself—see this as sign of the country’s return to the authoritarianism, secrecy, and isolationism of the Soviet Union.

I wasn't aware that the Russian government gives mothers 140 days of fully paid maternity leave, a lump-sum of cash to parents for each child born after the first, and also guarantees a mother’s job for

two years after the birth of her child. Though these laws seem to be altruistic in nature, they are meant to stimulate ethnic Russian birthrates rather than provide women with better economic footing.

> Women's salaries still lag way behind men's, so, as one woman put it, “forty percent of nothing is nothing”. . . . [M]any women are forced to work off the books so their employer won't have to pay maternity leave and social security taxes. Such an arrangement leave women with only a tiny maternal leave stipend and no job security (59).

Perhaps the most compelling part of the book was the reverence and adoration that many Russians—particularly, those in rural communities—have for Putin despite his worryingly authoritarian policies and now faltering economic policies. It makes sense, however, considering the fact that Russia has been more or less ran by a single person or small group of individuals for most of its modern history. Though Chelyabinsk, which was once completely closed off to foreigners, gained a newfound freedom to speak openly about their government as well as soak in pop culture, literature, and movies from other countries, this brought about unsureness and instability to many. Putin, however, is seen as a strong leader that will restore Russia to its former glory—politically, socially, militarily, and economically. Russians "are eager for the stability and a sense of national pride" after the "lawlessness and declining living standards [that] followed the collapse of the USSR" (6).

To further contextualize why Russian’s embrace Putin, Garrels argues that Boris Yeltsin’s presidency left them with a sense of “bitterness and anger of a jilted lover” towards the West and Russian democracy, especially following the clandestine privatization of former Soviet industries in the hands of a few “privileged mega-wealthy group of oligarchs”. Following the collapse of the USSR, many Russians had little hope for the future, thus further “fomenting feelings of humiliation and revenge” against the US and the West. A drop in Russian birthrates in the early 90s was contrasted with a sharp increase in stress-related heart attacks, alcoholism, murders, and suicides. The male life expectancy dropped from 64 years

in 1990 to 60 years in 1993, creating a staggering 13-year gap between male and female life expectancy (Shane). It hasn't improved much in the two decades since; the latest numbers from 20015 put male life expectancy at 64.7 years and female at 76.3 years.

This disturbing disparity between male and female life expectancy is largely fueled by illicit drug and alcohol consumption. Alcohol and drug usage—especially opiate-based ones—grew steadily in Russia after the failed invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s but completely boomed following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The group most prone to drug usage are Russia's youth, who often share heroin and *krokodil* needles with one another, causing a silent HIV and hepatitis c epidemic in the rural regions of the country. The Lancet medical journal states that Russia has the highest rate of injecting drug users (IDUs) in the world (1.8 million), with some 90 percent infected with hepatitis c. As many as 3 million people (20 percent of drug users) are HIV-positive, a number that some believe is merely a rough estimate. An astonishing one in four Russian men will die, most before reaching the age of retirement, due to alcohol-related issues. Like most other domestic problems, Russia shifted the blame to the US and the West for destabilizing Afghanistan, leaving it ripe for groups to grow and export opium in mass quantities (Hoskins).

The way that Garrels made Russia similar to the United States was in her description of how the rural communities in Russia are faring in a post-Soviet world and in the thralls of economic stagnation. In the US, the 2008 Great Recession affected manufacturing and agriculture-based rural counties the most. According to the US Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, "At the depths of the Great Recession, rural counties were shedding 200,000 jobs per year, rural unemployment stood at nearly 10%, and poverty rates reached heights unseen in decades". President Obama's administration took proactive steps to alleviate their plight, but recovery in rural communities has been sluggish at best, nonexistent at worse (Runyon).

Rural communities in the US have also been recently suffering from their own opioid crisis fueled by both prescription pills and cheap heroin which has created a domestic HIV and hepatitis C epidemic. The conservative values held by a majority of those living in these communities means that there is often a stigma against addiction. Harm reduction programs such as access to clean needles and counseling services are often discouraged by locals, making them scarce in communities that could perhaps benefit the most from them. Rather than focus on the rehabilitation of opioid addicts, authorities have largely decided to pursue an effort to criminalize their disease. Opioid consumption, but more importantly, our society's general response to the crisis it has created has a negative feedback loop in which economic and social challenges further exasperate opioid usage in rural counties, which, in turn, creates even more economic and social challenges for the population (Gale).

Though rural areas in both countries have arguably been the hit the hardest by economic plight as a result of the Great Recession, the majority of national and international focus on these countries fall largely on the urban population. Rural communities are often disregarded or written off by authorities and the public. This was the case during the 2016 US Presidential Election, where the vast majority of pollsters and the news media wrongly predicted that Hillary Clinton would win it handedly. Clinton largely ignored the white, working middle class with the belief that moderate Republicans and the same Democratic coalition of voters that won Obama the presidency in 2012 would be enough to win. Voters in rural areas came out in droves to support Trump and were ultimately his meal ticket to the Oval Office. Urban centers and big cities, on the other hand, overwhelmingly voted for Hillary Clinton (Kurtzleben).

Likewise in Russia, Western economic sanctions, free market trade deals, and the tumbling price of oil and natural gas have taken their toll on rural communities. Cities like Kuvshinovo suffer from crumbling buildings, pot hole-riddled streets, barren agricultural fields, and a declining population. In Chelyabinsk, "'secret' military and industrial installations" that were once state-owned and operated and that once employed tens of thousands of employees are now desolate. After decades of having the Soviet

Union subsidize apartment complexes, hospitals, daycare centers, and clinics that were once part of the “self-contained mini cities” surrounding these factories became privatized or were simply dumped off on the local governments who simply could not sustain them. This caused the economic disparity in Russia to balloon, as there was an “absence of credit and mortgages” meaning that the real estate market was only accessible to the wealthy elite (8). During this time, the economic prosperity fled from rural Russia into the cities—particularly Moscow, which became "not just the capital and seat of government", but also "the financial, commercial, cultural, and entertainment center" of Russia (5).

The picture that Garrels paints of rural Russia (Chelyabinsk, in particular) is one that is rather bleak yet potentially full of promise. The problems that the country is currently facing and will face in the upcoming years are both internal and external, though it is still debatable which of the two are seen as more pressing by the Russian people. Chelyabinsk, much like the rest of Russia, is becoming increasingly more and more integrated into the global society, but it is currently bogged down in a tug-of-war to decide which faction will come out on top. Will it be Russia’s youth, who long for freedom, are more cosmopolitan, and who don’t have a particular yearning for Soviet times? Or will it be Russia’s old guard—the corrupt businessmen and authoritarian politicians, the last remaining vestige of the old way of life?

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