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**The Russia Conundrum: How the West Fell for Putin's Power Gambit – And How to Fix It. By Mikhail Borisovich Khodorkovsky with Martin Sixsmith. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022.**

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***The Russia Conundrum: How the West Fell for Putin's Power Gambit – And How to Fix It.* By Mikhail Borisovich Khodorkovsky with Martin Sixsmith. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-250-28559-1 (hardcover). Photographs. Index. Pp. x, 342. \$29.99.**

Review by Edward M. Roche

This monograph aims to help the West understand the motivations, strategy, and behavior of the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin (b. 1952). The author writes in the form of an autobiography which details development of a business oil and gas empire and his rise to become the richest person in Russia, leading to close contact with President Putin and the surrounding *Siloviki*, a term that refers to the leadership of the special forces and law enforcement agencies, which the author characterizes as a Praetorian Guard for the Kremlin. It includes the Federal Security Service (FSB) which controls the Prosecutor's Office, the Investigative Committee, the Interior Ministry, the Customs Agency, Border Control, Intelligence, and the Federal Protection Service. It is the successor to the Committee for State Security (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*) well-known by its three-letter name, the KGB.

The book details how when President Putin gained power, he quickly exercised strong control over civil society and business, rewarding those who supported his government, and punishing those who dissented, including the author who suffered having his giant business taken away and being put into prison for a decade. "Putin ... move[d] to reimpose the deadening model of state control that had darkened Russia's past, subordinating the position of business, subverting democratic freedoms and individual rights" (p. 124).

Putin's philosophy is described as nostalgic for the "old" Russia, and its values which include fervent patriotism; statism, that is a strong role for the government in society; collectivism instead of individualism and entrepreneurialism; and an abstract notion of the "New Russia" idea, a merging of universal principles and traditional Russian values. These ideas were perhaps best expressed publicly during the opening ceremony in

2014 of the XXII Olympic Winter Games held in Sochi, where many of Russia's greatest writers, artists, and scientists were highlighted in a breathtaking form of public worship, and Putin was brought to tears.

The author chronicles the changing balance of power between civil society and the Russian government. This insider account is unique and provides much heretofore unknown detail such as names and dates. There also is coverage of international relations including deployment of the Wagner Private Military Company, and activities such as alleged random shooting of civilians, extrajudicial killings, gang rape and torture, in Ukraine, Crimea, the Central African Republic, and in Britain, where according to the author several Kremlin foes were eliminated, one by exposure to plutonium (polonium?)

There is also in-depth coverage of hacking and social media-based information warfare (propaganda campaign) activities aimed at the United States and its elections, all operated by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA), and the Russian military. These employed tools such as false-flag posting on social media, deployment of troll armies, mockery and slander, use of bots (automated programs that appear to be individuals), and recruitment of highly skilled programmers and IT specialists for this specialized work that also includes cyber industrial espionage and large-scale extortion through ransomware. It describes Russia's Translator Project which aimed to infiltrate political groups inside the United States to aid in these information operations and continuously collect intelligence.

The author attacks the Western policy of working with the Kremlin because "Russian authoritarianism will always be belligerent and aggressive" (p. 244). He argues that Russia will be a reliable and peaceful partner in the international community only when its government is replaced by a representative democracy or republic.

It is assessed that the Russian President is attempting to re-build the Soviet Union and the activity in Ukraine is only one of many attacks to come. He argues this *Weltanschauung* is more like 19th Century realist-school thinking about the role of nation states and their spheres of influence. As such, the only way to conduct relations with Russia is by showing strength and if necessary, use of force, of which the current proxy

war in the Ukraine is the leading example. Any show of compromise will be seen as weakness and automatically lead to an attack.

The book is written in flawless language helped by Martin Sixsmith a former BBC correspondent trained at Oxford, Leningrad, and the Sorbonne. It is invaluable for getting an inside view of political machinations in Russia and how governmental power is exercised, sometimes quite brutally.

The author has perhaps an overly optimistic view of how perfect the work of democracy in the West is, and the overall conceptual framework underpinning his analysis is of a personality-driven government, not the more abstract classical perspective of nation-state interests, which generally down-plays the importance of personality. In addition, there is no balanced discussion of how the West has interfered in Russia's internal affairs or otherwise harmed or threatened its interests and security. But if the reader wishes to learn what it is really like to do business in Russia, or to disagree with government policy, or the nuts and bolts of how that nation seeks out its interests in international relations, this book is a must-read. The reader likely will enjoy this glimpse into the thinking and logic of such a compelling and brilliant observer who actually lived to tell the story.