

Keir Giles, **Russia's War on Everybody and What it Means for You**. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 246 + xviii pages. ISBN 978-1-3502-5508-1.

For at least two decades now, international scholars have been busy at work studying transformation of the world order, from a unipolar system led by the United States to a more multipolar constellation with the BRICS countries vying for their share of power.<sup>1</sup> For most of this time, mainstream books on Russia roughly fell into the following three categories: either books presenting Russia as a quirky cabinet of curiosities with readers raising eyebrows at the impossible state of affairs in the Russian state,<sup>2</sup> books infatuated with the personality of Vladimir Putin<sup>3</sup> or books providing a reflection as well as a warning for the Western audiences on dangers of populism and its slippery path towards totalitarianism if we are not careful enough.<sup>4</sup>

Only a handful of authors traced the return of Russia's imperial ambitions.<sup>5</sup> However, most of their findings fell on deaf ears, because ever since Huntington's clash of civilizations pitted "the West" against "the rest" – with a particular role assigned to "Confucian-Islamic Connection"<sup>6</sup> – mainstream scholars' sights fixed firmly first on the Islamist terrorist threat in the first decade and then on the spectacular rise of China in the second decade of the twenty-first century in anticipation of a great power showdown between China and the United States.<sup>7</sup> Russia thus remained out of focus.

Oblivious to scholarly debates, tensions continued to rise, and as it usually happens, something had to give: systemic changes are often accompanied by conflict as states reshuffle into their new positions. What very few expected, though, is that the clash

---

<sup>1</sup> Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge: polity, 2014); or Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions. America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible. The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014); and Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy. Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Galeotti, *We Need to Talk about Putin. Why the West Gets Him Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 2019); Brian Taylor, *Code of Putinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); or Richard Sakwa, *The Putin Paradox* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War. Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy. The Return of Great Power Politics* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009); and Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War. Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49, here 45.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* (London: Penguin Books, 2010); John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no 4 (December 2010): 381–396, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poq016>; or more recently Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Superpowers. China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

could start at the borders of a declining great power looking to save its face.<sup>8</sup> But the future always has a way of sneaking up on the analyst in an unexpected way and February 24, 2022 was like a punch to the gut to many within international relations community now suddenly scrambling to make sense of this new reality. We have woken up into a different world and now our eyes are finally fixed on Russia and Ukraine crushing our preconceptions.

In a rush to understand what is happening, and more importantly, *why* it is happening, a host of new books on Russia are being published: Mark Galeotti's *Putin's Wars. From Chechnya to Ukraine* and *The Weaponisation of Everything. A Field Guide to the New Way of War* (both 2022) dedicated to Russian foreign activities<sup>9</sup> or Jade McGlynn's *Memory Makers. The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia* and *Russia's War* (both 2023) providing a look into the Russian soul, society and ideology,<sup>10</sup> and finally, Keir Giles' *Russia's War on Everybody and What it Means for You* (2023).<sup>11</sup> Most of these books have been written before the full-scale invasion – Giles too acknowledges finishing the manuscript in October 2021 and then having to update it in light of recent events – but they are cast in a different light now that we are all finally paying attention.

Giles' book *Russia's War on Everybody and What it Means for You* is a compact and comprehensive guide for people who are not too familiar with Russian foreign activities but are interested in learning more – quickly – as it contains a little bit of everything that has already been said: Chapter 1 deals with the impossible, ridiculous and surreal nature of Russia stuck in a different century mentality reminiscent of Pomerantsev's *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* or Lucas' *The New Cold War*. The author's advice is to “suspend disbelief” because attempts to find logic where there is none – at least not one along the Western lines of rational thinking as Giles demonstrated in his 2019 book *Moscow Rules*<sup>12</sup> – ultimately leave us blind to the opportunistic creative destruction that seems to be the Russian *modus operandi* detailed in the following pages. Chapter 2 gives us a look behind the scenes into the paranoid propaganda-controlled Russian politics reminiscent of Snyder's “politics of eternity”<sup>13</sup> full of twisted historical narratives and in dire need of foreign enemies simply to keep attention away from the poor, corrupt and

---

<sup>8</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, “International Relations Theory and the Ukraine War,” *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 1 (2022): 111–135, <https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2022-2021>.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Galeotti, *Putin's Wars. From Chechnya to Ukraine* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2022), see the respective book review in this journal issue. See also Mark Galeotti, *The Weaponisation of Everything. A Field Guide to the New Way of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Jade McGlynn, *Memory Makers. The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023); Jade McGlynn, *Russia's War* (Cambridge: polity, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> For a list of books new and old on Russia and Ukraine see Stuart Anderson, “The Books To Read About Russia And Ukraine,” *Forbes*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2022/10/12/the-books-to-read-about-russia-and-ukraine/>.

<sup>12</sup> Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules. What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press and London Chatham House, 2019). See the respective book review in this journal, vol. 22, no. 2 (2022): 93–97, <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363231.2023.6>.

<sup>13</sup> Snyder, *Road to Unfreedom*, Ch. 1. See also McGlynn, *Memory Makers*.

dysfunctional Russian state. Under such circumstances, Giles writes, it is not only naïve but downright dangerous to keep on approaching Russia as if it was just another normal power or a normal state you could negotiate with. As seen in the long history of relationship “resets” between the US and Russia or decades-long advocacy of an open dialogue by the European Union, such approach is rewarding rather than sanctioning Russia for its transgressions. For the last “20 years [we] have seen a pattern of Russia consistently demonstrating that it believes in a form of power from a different place and a different time, that European leaders who believe all conflict can be resolved by dialogue are simply not equipped to deal with” (p. 57).

Chapter 3 deals precisely with how that “form of power from a different place” and time looks like – a phenomenon commonly referred to in the literature as “hybrid warfare.” This description is, nevertheless, somewhat lacking in depth as it describes the tools used rather than the motives and intent behind them that Giles is interested in. Lacking in any credible “soft power,” Russia is looking to use a panoply of other “active measures” – anything from targeting digital infrastructure, supporting protest movements, information warfare to jamming GPS or murder (pp. 83–88) – to influence target countries through more or less illicit means. All of the incidents that Giles illustrates highlight “Russia’s regularly repeated approach of creating problems and crises in order to extract concessions in exchange for removing them, in a process of blackmail leaving Russia better off than before it started” (p. 87). Such an approach of using any and every opportunity short of open confrontation to harass is not self-serving; it is part of a broader strategy of exploiting Western vulnerabilities and blind spots to influence/cause harm but escape the repercussions. Citing former Australian Army officer and unconventional warfare specialist David Kilcullen: “Russian style of operations has emerged with a very careful sequencing and integration of different activities to stay in that liminal space, and get done what you need to get done and get back down below the detection threshold before an adversary can respond” (p. 100).

In Chapter 4, Giles documents the role of the regular army: from Potemkin-style May 9th parades in the Red Square giving impressions of the latest modern equipment, to armed forces restructuring of the past decade to testing them in Syria and to regular skirmishes in the Baltic and Scandinavian airspace. A subchapter on nuclear arms details the cunning irresponsibility with which Russia approaches international cooperation. New arms control treaties which Russia ignores until the point it has built enough of these arms itself and then publicly disses other countries from having had enough and stepping away from the defunct treaty too – the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty being case in point (p. 111). Nuclear threats in and of themselves fit into the larger strategy of blackmail Russia employs, citing officially former Russian military intelligence officer Dmitri Trenin: “the ‘world is visibly moving toward military collision between major powers. However, no great power would be willing to accept defeat in conventional conflict at [the] hands of another great power without recourse to nuclear weapons’ – the implication being, of course, that nobody should attempt to defeat Russia. [...] The more robustly-minded Russia-watchers in the West refer to this as the ‘Don’t upset Russia too much or

they'll invade a NATO country' trap; 'if we get nuked, it will be our own fault for making Putin feel threatened'" (p. 119). A subchapter on Ukraine, despite Russian miscalculation and strategic errors, still illustrates painfully the consequences of Western policy of misunderstanding and/or turning a blind eye to Russian misbehavior and stands in stark contrast to the situation in the Baltic states which, unlike Ukraine, are firmly embedded in Western institutions including NATO with troops present as a successful deterrent.

At this point, one might now rightfully ask: what is then the added value of reading Giles' book if he just keeps on bringing up themes explored in more depth by other authors? Besides drawing richly on open sources, what lends depth to the book is Giles having interviewed over 40 people from all walks of life (some of them already cited above): from academics, through intelligence officers, journalists, cybersecurity and disinformation experts to public servants on national as well as European levels (see their list on pp. 229–230). The interviewees do not only share their opinions, but also their personal experiences with Russian encounters, and thus make Russian "active measures" more relatable.

This becomes particularly acute in Chapters 5 and 6, where Giles makes a break with current literature on Russia, and finally delivers on the book title bait "war on everybody" and "what it means for *you*" with chilling intimacy. From diplomats' unsolicited home visits betrayed only by a window consciously left open, toilets not flushed, to stolen iPad cables and single stolen running shoe from a pair done solely for the purpose of messing around with a person's sense of security. But, you do not have to be a diplomat to be targeted! Giles brings narratives of duped journalists: "If it can happen to me, it can happen to anyone" (p. 145), online witch-hunts of Kremlin critics, hacked phones of servicemen stationed near Russian borders with deleted contacts and playing "creepy Russian hip-hop" (p. 154). No one is too unimportant, from charity workers to religious organizations, to become a target because as the Russian propagandist Dmitriy Kiselev put it on the American PBS: "If you can persuade a person, you don't need to kill him. Let's think about what's better: to kill or to persuade? Because if you aren't able to persuade, then you will have to kill" (p. 130). Nevertheless, there are people who work for Russia more or less consciously, as outlined in Chapter 6: greedy bankers and businessmen, lawyers and politicians. They do it for "MICE" – money, ideology, compromise (meaning not compromise with Russia, but because they are being compromised, blackmailed through sensitive *kompromat* incriminating material) or ego (or a combination of all four). They do it because of short term rewards rather than long term security, and many continue to spread Russian influence simply because they are "useful idiots" (p. 166).

The reasons why people fall under Russian influence, consciously as well as unconsciously, are further explored in Chapter 7 which brings us again to more common ground: the intricate mix of business, crime and state apparatus. It is not easy to make sense of a network of connections between state agencies, oligarch sponsors and criminal underground when nothing is as it seems – a veil of offshore companies hiding the public-private connections, mercenaries doing the state's dirty work and so on and so forth. However, this network would not have been as influential abroad were it not for all the

people enabling it to work in target countries themselves: all the less-than-diligent bank clerks, lawyers, corrupt or just egocentric political actors and useful idiots introduced in Chapter 6.

The outlook that concluding Chapter 8 gives is not very optimistic. The Russian war on Ukraine has indeed woken the West up to the multifaceted threat Russia poses to the world. Mainstream academia as well as the public are finally beginning to get to grips with how Russia operates. Russia playing according to its own rules *does not* mean it is completely unpredictable as some patterns have not changed since tsarist empire, only the technology of putting them into practice has, and understanding this is the first necessary step in our line of defense. In this regard, Keir Giles' book is a great compact and comprehensive guide for us to better understand these patterns as well as the current means and motives of Russian "active measures."

But there are many more steps to follow no matter the result in Ukraine, since "Russia cannot change at home, so [it] seeks to change the world around it – sowing misery in the attempt," it will continue to pose danger (p. 222). Thus, our line of responses, once we *do* understand the nature of West-Russia relationship, should focus on what is working: unity and joint responses, confidence in the West and in our soft power of attraction. Since Russia uses any and every opportunity to interfere, it is key to minimize the opportunities we give and vulnerabilities of a free democratic society we have, but without losing our values in the process. We need to respond strongly to hostile Russian actions, not just let them slide and reward Russia with more dialogue. We should use more "unpredictability" in our strategies towards Russia as we are too clear to read. As well as the low-level response Giles does not mention in the conclusion, that nevertheless seems to work against Russian propaganda is responding "in kind" – twisting Russian propaganda online to reveal its absurdity and humiliate authors (which is the opposite of what Russia wants to achieve) as @DarthPutinKGB Twitter account does.

There is no easy solution, but now we see in plain sight what the alternative is.

*Daniela Lenčėš Chalániová*  
doi: 10.14712/23363231.2023.17