

**BOOK REVIEW**  
**THE DIFFICULTY OF EXPLAINING POLITICS OR WHY SIX  
PUTINS ARE SUPPOSEDLY BETTER THAN ONE**

**Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy. 2013. *Mr. Putin. Operative in the Kremlin.* Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 377p. ISBN-13: 978-0815723769**

**Radu Alexandru CUCUȚĂ**

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration  
Bucharest, Romania  
*raducucuta@gmail.com*

Fiona Hill's and Clifford G. Gaddy's book, *Mr. Putin. Operative in the Kremlin*, is an attempt to explain Russia's foreign policy and its transformation during the terms of Vladimir Putin. The recent events in Ukraine and Russia's decision to annex Crimea make the book an even more warranted release, given that an important number of accounts of the situation are centred on the role the incumbent Russian president plays in the politics of his country.

*Mr. Putin. Operative in the Kremlin* walks a fine line between a biography and a political explanation of the Russian political system. The book remains centred on the life and the personality of Vladimir Putin. Accurately researched, as far as the public statements of the incumbent Russian President throughout his political career, as well as those of the people who have interacted with him, are concerned, the book manages to amaze the reader with its passion for details. *Mr. Putin* is pleasant and entertaining reading.

The ability of the authors to transcend the cultural barrier and to play the role of modern interpreters of contemporary Russian political culture is a welcomed addition – the intersubjective references to Soviet humour or the elegant distinction between *Russkaya ideya* and *Rossiyskaya ideya* (which is in fact one of the most prominent ideological underpinnings the text should have dwelled upon) show that the analysis can move beyond third-person outside

accounts and highlight a genuine interpretative account (Hill and Gaddy 2013, 45-47).

The thorough reading of the Russian media, as well as the detailed familiarity with Russian popular culture manages to put Vladimir Putin's actions and his rise to power in a different light. It is also important to note the familiarity of the authors with Russian history and the domestic ideologies manifested during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The book is structured into 10 chapters, which discuss Putin's rise and his influence on Russian politics. The first chapter summarizes the author's perspective on the Russian president's manner of conducting politics: his KGB background, as well as his background, starting from childhood and adolescence, his reaction to Russia's crisis during Boris Yeltsin's term, are all considered formative experiences for the Russian president. The explanatory framework rests behind what the authors coin as Putin's "identities": according to the authors, Putin frequently combines or moves between the *Statist*, *History Man*, *Survivalist*, *Outsider*, *Free Marketer* and *Case Officer* identities. While the first three identities are "most generic" and applicable "to a larger group of Russians", the last three are rather particular to Putin (Hill and Gaddy 2013, 7-8). The second chapter analyzes the problems Moscow has encountered after the end of the Cold War, during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, while the next six chapters are dedicated to the six "identities" highlighted by the authors. The penultimate chapter describes the political system built by Putin, whereas the last part of the book focuses on the future perspectives of the Russian president and the leadership system he has built.

Assessing these identities, Hill and Gaddy conclude that even if Putin has managed to maintain his prominence in Russian politics, inevitably this juggling of identities showed its limits, as far as the "stakeholders", Russia's aspiring middle class, is concerned. The conclusion of the book, written before the events in Ukraine, which saw Putin's popularity rise tremendously, is that Putin's personal brand of politics might prove unable to deliver on its promises and to fulfil the expectations of these "stakeholders".

The first argument the reader might raise is connected with the utility of employing a first-level analysis of Russian politics. On the one hand, the authors employ a clearly individualistic methodological outlook. While Marx had argued that "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they

please”, Hill and Gaddy are certain that “Putin shaped his own fate, in large part because of the nature of his six core identities” (Hill and Gaddy 2013, 12). On the other hand, there is no defence against the arguments seldom brought against first-level attempts at explaining politics. In spite of the thorough documentation and familiarity with Russian politics, popular culture or ideology, the problem of collecting data remains prominent, as the authors clearly admit when discussing Putin’s years in the GDR or his term as FSB chief. Even for a staunch individualist, there is a context influencing domestic or foreign policy decisions and, while leaving room for the role an assertive and decidedly important leader might play, focusing on his biography can amount only to offering complementary details to an International Relations account (Apahideanu 2006, 64).

Another thorny issue lies with the “identities” themselves. Firstly, it is not clear what the authors mean by identity. There is no reference to a clear definition of the concept, in spite of the fact that the scholarly research on this issue, especially in social sciences, is ample (Abdelal *et al.* 2001, 1-6).

Secondly, the authors use the concept in a manner that resembles rather the concept of “discourse”: Putin employs in different contexts a socially legitimate discourse, in order to achieve a specific political goal. It is not clear however for the authors whether Putin genuinely shares the values implicit to the discourses or whether these are just of instrumental value for an autocrat willing to cement his own rule. Consequently, this leads to an additional problem, as far as the explanation of the authors is concerned: if Putin has managed to use PR to his ends, how come the same mechanisms seem to be failing the leader of a permanent political campaign? Unfortunately, for all the efforts of the authors, some of the conclusions they reach seem rather trivial: Putin’s “firm conviction that his personal destiny is intertwined with that of the Russian state and its past” (Hill and Gaddy 2013, 63) is rather a run-of-the-mill argument concerning dictators.

Thirdly, the line between the “identities” is itself blurry. If “statism” is to designate an ideology centred on strengthening the Russian state after the “Times of Trouble” experienced during Yeltsin’s time, with the hope of restoring Moscow’s fortunes abroad and at home at the same time, the concept of “sovereign democracy” is then artificially prescribed to “the history man” section of identity. For the political science scholar reading the book, it is somehow ironic that while insisting on Putin’s emphasis on the need of a

strong state, no mention of fascism is ever made. There is no clear line dividing the first three generic “identities” of President Putin. The myth of the Russian state, the appeal to Imperial Russia’s ideology, the appeal for a synthesis between the views of the Russian émigrés and those of the post-Soviet statisticians (Hill and Gaddy 2013, 105), all point towards a rather unified perspective.

The lack of references to otherwise useful social or political science concepts is disturbing. The literature on nationalism, authoritarianism, transition, development or social change might have offered additional clarity to a work which undoubtedly has elegant insights into Russian politics. Accounts just as controversial, but with a cleared methodological and theoretical outlook, seem to offer more generous prospects (see Dawisha 2014). Unfortunately, the methodological choice of resorting to “multiple identities” only seems to create more problems that it manages to resolve. All in all, Hill and Gaddy’s book remains only a useful complementary instrument for the scholar or reader interested in International Relations or Russian politics.

## REFERENCES

- Abdelal, Rawi, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Terry Martin. 2001. "Treating Identity as a Variable: Measuring the Content, Intensity, and Contestation of Identity," paper prepared for presentation at the American Political Science Association meeting, San Francisco, August 30-September 2.
- Apahideanu, Ionuț. 2006. "Problema nivelurilor de analiză în Relațiile Internaționale". In *Manual de Relații Internaționale*, edited by Andrei Miroiu and Radu-Sebastian Ungureanu, 61-70. Iași: Polirom.
- Dawisha, Karen. 2014. *Putin's Kleptocracy. Who Owns Russia?*, New York & London: Simon & Schuster.
- Hill, Fiona and Clifford G. Gaddy. 2013. *Mr. Putin. Operative in the Kremlin*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.