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Revista estudiantil de asuntos transdisciplinarios

Una publicación de



FACULTAD DE
DERECHO Y CIENCIAS
SOCIALES



The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin

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GESSEN, Masha (2012). *The Man Without a Face-The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*. Riverhead Books, 322 pp.

Masha Gessen's "The Man without a Face-the Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin" is a biography of the Russian president Vladimir Putin. It focuses on Putin's rise to the top of the power in the Russian state and examines the events and circumstances leading up to this in great detail. The author ties Putin's biography to recent events in Russian history, taking readers all the way from the Soviet times to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and over the first attempts at building a democracy to the current state of the Russian politics.

The author of the book, Masha Gessen, was born on January 13, 1967, in Moscow, Russia. However, later, her family immigrated to the United States. There, Masha worked as a jour-

nalist for various American newspapers and magazines before returning to Russia as a political correspondent, until very recently holding the position of Director of the American-funded Radio Liberty. She holds both Russian and American citizenship.

Gessen begins her account with a description of Boris Yeltsin's dilemma of having no political successor to take over Russia. She describes how Putin came to be the faltering regime's first choice and examines the reasons behind this choice. Gessen goes on to depict the events leading up to Putin's election and then circles back to Putin's beginnings, describing his childhood and youth as well as his career with the KGB and its successor organization, FSB. She then pro-

ceeds to analyze the events and actions taking place since Putin's rise to power and exposes how he has been systematically dismantling Russia's democracy, including the most important and newsworthy events in recent Russian history and linking them to Putin's agenda and actions. Finally, the author arrives at the current state of affairs in Russia and ends her narrative with an up close report of the Russian protests in 2011.

Gessen's writing style is a very clear cut and possibly more that of a journalist than of a novelist (perhaps, not surprising considering her professional background). She tells the story as it is, neither using complicated language nor unnecessary decorative language. Considering her direct or indirect involvement in many of the events she describes, the reader is given a more personal view, at times there is even a slightly ironic or cynical undertone to the narration. Nevertheless, Gessen's overriding style is dominantly informative, listing the facts as they are in a rather investigative and journalistic manner.

The main character in the book is Vladimir Putin, but there are also many other characters featured throughout the story. Among them are many important figures of Russian politics and

society such as the former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko, former chess champion Garry Kasparov, and former billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Gessen ties the lives and stories of these and many other prominent Russian individuals with the doings and plans of Putin and his government.

Gessen has managed to create a novel that is more or less a play by play account of Putin's malevolence deeds since his arrival at the top of the power in Russia. Her book can be also considered as a documented record of a man's rise to power and his ability to turn a blossoming young democracy into a tyranny of gigantic proportions. Perhaps, if this was simply a story of one of –unfortunately– many dictatorships in Africa or elsewhere in the so-called Third World, the story would be sadly enough but nothing new. Yet, being Russia –one of the world's largest, wealthiest, and most influential countries adds another dimension and complexity to the matter. Not only has Putin managed to get away with his agenda without having any sanctions imposed on him, as is the due course with other dictators, but he has the world believing –or at least behaving– like his regime is a democracy. The

amount of audacity this man possesses is sometimes really incomprehensible.

Critical reviews of this book often point out that there is nothing new about Gessen's revelations and that the information that the book reveals is already known. While this may be true for a well-informed person familiar with the political development in Russia, it is not so for the general public. Many of the facts in this book were news to me, making it a highly interesting and eye-opening reading. Of course, it is a well known fact that Putin is corrupt and his regime is not democratically sound, but the sheer dimensions of his doings have truly surprised me.

For me, the true value of this book lies in its capacity to bring all the facts together in one place in an easily accessible manner for a general public and thus drawing attention to the wrong-doings of one of the most powerful men in the world. The best way to achieve a change in Russia—or in any society for that sense—is to expose the practices and wrong-doings of those in charge and to achieve a higher degree of awareness among its citizens. And this is what is happening in Russia at the moment, awareness is growing and sometimes is transformed into actions as

it happened in the case of the protests in December 2011. And this is what eventually will bring about a regime change; as Gessen states: "*it may take months or it may take a few years, but the Putin bubble will burst*" (Gessen, 2013:240).