

All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin.
Zygar Mikhail. New York: Public Affairs, 2016, 400.

Ume Farwa*

The former editor of the Russian independent media outlet Dozhd, Mikhail Zygar, explores various dimensions of Russia's internal politics. His gripping narrative provides an insight into how Putin is running the house. Based on his interviews with the influential players in the Kremlin, Zygar masterly depicts the crossing networks of legitimate and political power used by shifting loyalties, strategies and motivations.

In sharp contrast to the traditional approach which depicts a powerful Putin, Zygar's book sheds more light on the power play of the business tycoons, former spies and nationalist hardliners who have antagonistic agendas and interests vis-a-vis president of Russia. Contradicting the prevailing narratives about Putin's power, Zygar maintains that most of the power we tend to ascribe to Putin does not lie in his hands only and that the Putin that is generally imagined does not exist. However, the author of this book writes that, despite all political manoeuvring, Putin manages to get an upper hand in all the political affairs.

Zygar portrays Putin as a dictator of unique temperament, who is deftly utilising the instruments of authoritarianism while balancing the growing influence of his chief advisors. As noted by the author, inside several times of his Putin's new residency, he had seen off the liberal dissent development, added Crimea to the Russian territory and managed to earn appreciation in the Western capitals as well. The Western approvals hit his circle hard, yet no one challenged him since they realised that he was the source and underwriter of their riches. Putin's great support was what gave them authenticity. He had, by this point, ended up fixated on victimhood – Russia's strategic and otherworldly solace cover.

* *The reviewer is Research Fellow/Sub-editor at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.*

The author paints a big political canvas that the Kremlin is and depicts masterly how the men at Kremlin navigate the vicious circle of “absolute power” through scheming, manoeuvring and conspiracies. Regarding this, the author mentions, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev is a case in point. Just like Boris Yeltsin, Putin picked Medvedev from nowhere to keep a close watch on the presidential affairs. In the form of Medvedev, Putin indeed brought his own protégé to the Kremlin in order to maintain his influence. Putin attempted to bring some constitutional order into the criminal factions and also looked for a rapprochement of sorts with the west. The US President, Barack Obama, and the European leaders were amazed when the Russians did not protest the bombarding of Libya. Putin, in any case, was enraged and could never give Medvedev a chance to overlook his disloyalty.

While commenting on Putin’s perceptions about the European and US leaders, the author provides a critical yet precise insight. According to the writer, Putin harbours strong disliking for the US President Obama. In the same vein, as Zygar observed, Putin sees Angela Merkel as the instigator for a harder European reaction to Russia. The author reasoned that the consistent help that Russia provides for Trump and France’s far-right, Marine Le Pen, and the enjoyment enrolled over Brexit is all a matter of Putin’s ideological vendetta towards the West. The author predicts that Russia will utilise a range of instruments to drive a wedge among the European capitals and will work towards undermining and eroding the collective base of the European norms.

While accentuating the court’s reliance on Putin, Zygar’s inference is more nuanced. He thinks that Putin progressed toward becoming what he is today because the people around him considered him to be the least complex way for their own advancement and political stability. In attempting to divine the goals of their pioneer, Putin’s partners viably appeared their own desires. At the end of the day, the author concluded, Putin is all the more a phenomenon of the Russian politics than a mere leader.