

***The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia,*  
Masha Gessen, New York: Riverhead Books, 2017, 528.**

*Ume Farwa\**

In the West, Russia has always been a topic of intense debate but Putin's leadership raised more questions all across the western capitals. In presidency, his apparent tilt towards the West and approval of democratic political system made many to believe that Putin's 'Modern Russia' is different from its predecessor, Soviet Union. In this context, a Russo-American journalist and an outspoken critic of President Putin, Masha Gessen offers a window of insight to the totalitarian dynamics of post-Soviet Russia.

She offers a historical account of the events starting from haphazard liberalisation in Gorbachev's era when, according to the writer, the people were living in an altogether different Russia. Afterwards, she takes her reader to the time when two Chechens attacked Moscow White House in 1993, leading to the rise of Putin as an influential figure in the state. Here, she argues that the political manoeuvres and development at the heart of Russian capital never made it fit for a pluralistic society but for an oligarchy which still is a morphed form of totalitarianism.

Masha traces the origins of totalitarianism in 'Modern Russia' and explains how the Soviet legacy has deluded the prospects of liberal, democratic and pluralistic society. Written in the backdrop of Putin's tall claims of Russia being a modern pluralistic state, the author presents an alarming narrative of political system in Moscow.

Masha, as a vehement critic of deep state as well, criticised on Putin's lack of statesmanship and projected him as more of a master spy. Narrating Putin's coming to power, in 2002, she maintained that the deep state tightened its control and created a political system which was built on the legacy of Soviet totalitarian system. She explains that, during the

---

\* *The reviewer is Research Fellow and Sub-editor, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.*

2011 protest movements, Putin and his aides thrived on the loyalists of the regime.

She predicts that the current choices and political machinations in Russia are aimed at crushing all opposition against the Putin regime. She compares this style of governance and silencing opposition with the ones that were adopted by Hitler in Nazi Germany and Stalin in the Soviet Union. Masha Gessen labels Putin's promises of democracy as hollow and shallow.

Masha is highly critical of Putin's regime as she compares him with Hitler. This bias appears as a weakness of her argument as well. She digresses repeatedly into debates of Political Science, Sociology and personality analysis. The book is lengthy and replete with multi-disciplinary digressions. Ms. Gessen narrates the story of 'Modern Russia' with the help of seven Russians whose life experiences were shaped during Putin's presidency. However, none of these individuals represent contemporary Russia. As a corollary, her argument becomes weak.

The author's forceful and eloquent trail of Russian history makes it a wonderful read for those who are interested in the past and future of the country. Another strength of the book is its style. It is not just a book about country's internal power dynamics but a gripping piece of writing weaved into literature, history and social realities. Although she appears too skeptic and critical, Putin's current move of dissolving the state Duma and making it just a puppet at his disposal indicates the author's deep insight into the Russian system other than her skepticism.