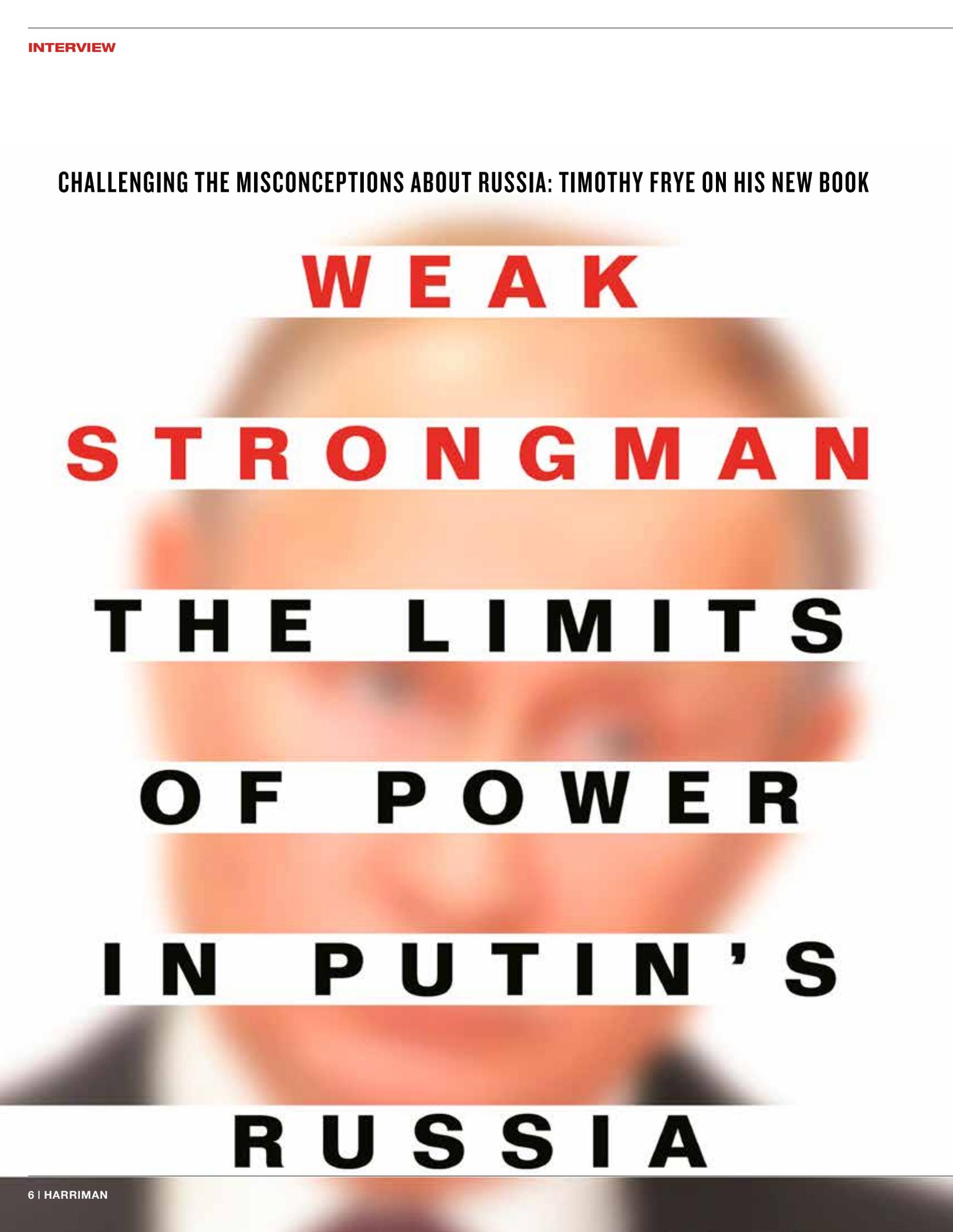


CHALLENGING THE MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT RUSSIA: TIMOTHY FRYE ON HIS NEW BOOK



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BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

Last spring Timothy Frye, a political scientist who directed the Harriman Institute from 2009 to 2015, published a new book, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (Princeton University Press, April 2021). Aimed at general audiences and buttressed by Frye's extensive personal experiences in Russia, the book challenges popular misconceptions about Russia with interdisciplinary academic research and argues that Russia is more like other autocracies than conventional wisdom suggests.

I spoke with Frye in June 2021. Our conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: This book is different from your other books—it has a lot of personal anecdotes, and it's aimed at a more general audience. I'm curious; why did you decide to write it in this way?

Timothy Frye: I've been thinking about this book for a long time. I started the project in 2015. I was reading all this really interesting research on public opinion, on polling and election fraud, and on repression, and it just was not jiving with the way many people in popular outlets were writing about Russia. I found it really frustrating that scholars had put in years of research on topics that were of general interest to policy makers,

Timothy Frye. Photo
by Eileen Barroso,
Columbia University.



Russia watchers, and to academics, and it was just really not getting the attention that I thought it deserved.

So, the book was originally designed as an explainer book. The goal was to translate the research my colleagues and I were doing for a general audience. And I think for the most part it's remained true to that vision. And it required a very different writing style, which was both a lot of fun and very challenging.

Udensiva-Brenner: You mentioned during your book talk at the Harriman Institute that you also wanted to turn the heat down a little bit on the debate about Russia. Can you talk about what you meant?

Frye: The debate about Russia seems inevitably to be very high pitched and very heated. We don't have the same kind of debates about Brazil or Turkey. Or even Iran, which is a hot-button issue. We're starting to have similar levels of enmity and debates about China, but even there, I don't think the rift between different schools of thought about how to approach China is as great as it is on Russia. And I don't think that's particularly helpful.

The book tries to use the best academic evidence we have—and, of course, academics have their own biases, but the general review process irons out a lot of the worst biases that come through in academic research, because reviewers will not allow you to get away with making claims that are not credible and backed up with evidence. So, by relying more on the academic research, I hope the book forces us to think harder about the kinds of evidence often used in debates about Russia. I also wanted to put my own stories in the book to

try to personalize the book and also reduce the heat.

Udensiva-Brenner: There are a lot of myths and misconceptions about Russia. What are some of the biggest misconceptions that frustrated you while you were writing the book?

Frye: There is a point of view that Putin is this all-powerful master who's able to turn elections abroad with a wave of his hand—that he's able to hoodwink the Russian people just by making a few statements or by cranking up the propaganda machine.

But what I try to show is that when we look closely across a whole range of issues, we see that Putin faces many difficult trade-offs and is often much more constrained than we realize. People often conflate the notion that he has no open political competitors, particularly now that Navalny has been sidelined, with the idea that he can do whatever he wants. But Putin has to manage this large, corrupt, self-interested bureaucracy—to govern a territory of more than 140 million people across 11 time zones. And they often resist a lot of what he's trying to do. He also faces the difficult trade-off of trying to keep his inner circle happy so they do not stage a coup, and also to keep the mass public happy so they do not protest. And often those two goals are at odds with each other.

So, I write in the book about the problem of corruption, which enables Putin's elite cronies to enrich themselves—and then they continue to support Putin. But at the same time, Putin can't allow them to distort the economy so much that the economy really tanks and people's living standards fall. Then the public will be much more likely to protest, which is

Pictured: Protest against the arrest of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, January 2021. Photo by Kirill Zharkoy via Unsplash.

also bad for the Kremlin. So, as we look issue by issue, Putin faces a host of these trade-offs.

Udensiva-Brenner: Another trade-off you mention in the book is foreign policy. The more assertive Putin is abroad, the worse the Russian economy ends up doing, and the economy is what kept him popular in the first place. Can you talk about that?

Frye: People often look at Putin's assertive foreign policy as if he doesn't pay any price for it. But, in the long run, I think this is one of the most difficult trade-offs that Putin faces, because his more assertive foreign policy in Ukraine and in Syria has not only invited sanctions, which have hurt the Russian economy, but also it empowers those groups in Russia who are least interested in economic reform and economic growth. It's the status quo political constituency that benefits from this more assertive policy rather than the firms that would like to do business with the West—the firms that don't have privileged access to the state and that don't have good connections.

These groups are all a possible base for a reorientation of Russian foreign policy. But Putin has chosen to pay the costs of slow economic growth and the continued distortions in the economy generated by his more assertive foreign policy.

Udensiva-Brenner: And because of all this, and the economic stagnation and dissatisfaction among society, Putin then has to ramp up repression, which you also say comes at a great cost. Can you talk about the costs of political repression?

Frye: Sure. One point of view is that Putin's increased use of repression is really a sign of his strength—he's so powerful that he can use repression in order to sideline his political opponents. And that's one argument, but I don't think that's really the correct one.

I think Putin resorts to increased repression not as a first choice, but because other less costly ways of governing Russia have become much less effective. Putin's popularity is not what it was, and public trust in Putin has fallen too. The economy, which was a great source of popular support for Putin, has been stagnant for a decade.

There's no second Crimea on the horizon that would boost his popularity again. And even propaganda has become less effective. More Russians are getting their news from social media now—the number of people getting news from state sources has declined. So, all these other tools, which are less costly, are failing; and Putin has turned to repression.

Repression doesn't solve the economic problem. If anything, it makes it worse. It doesn't help resolve the problem of low trust in government. It also doesn't help solve the corruption problem. It might even make the corruption problem worse, because those groups that are benefiting from corruption are also the ones that are benefiting from repression.

The real danger is that autocrats like Putin come to rely more and more on repression because the underlying problems that generate opposition in the first place become much more difficult to solve. Autocrats tend to use repression when other tools don't work. I think we see that in the Russian case.

Photo by Valery Tenevoy via Unsplash.

Udensiva-Brenner: I want to talk a little bit about Russian society and the misconceptions there. One prevailing narrative that you challenge in your book is this idea of Homo Sovieticus. Can you talk about what that is and what the flaws in that narrative are?

Frye: There is a long-standing idea that the Soviet system created a sense of values and attitudes among citizens of the Soviet Union that made them more passive toward authority, more willing to cut corners and engage in unethical practices, uninterested in politics, and with values that would make it difficult to adapt to a market society based on free exchange. Given the system that they were raised in, they can rationalize these kinds of behavior. But there is not a lot of evidence for this view.

When we look at things like voting participation rates in the 1990s in Russia, which were higher in the presidential elections in 1996 and then in 2000 than they were in the United States, we see that given the chance to take part in competitive elections, Russians were no less likely to vote than were citizens in many other countries.

There was a great study where researchers literally dropped tens of thousands of wallets in 40 different countries. In some wallets researchers placed small amounts of money, and in some there was no money, but in all cases there were instructions about who the owner was and how they could be returned. And what the researchers found was that Russians were just as likely to return the wallets as were American, British, and Canadian citizens. So, it doesn't seem that there's underlying support for high levels of unethical behavior among Russians.

And then finally, there's the notion that Russians like a strong hand. If we

look at the evidence, there's not a lot of support for that view either. Even in the United States, about 20 percent of Americans think that the country would be better off if it was governed by an unelected leader, which is not that different from what we see in Russia.

Now, there are a couple of areas where Russian attitudes differ from citizens of other countries at their level of economic development. Support for the welfare state is greater, in part because of the Soviet legacy and the extensive benefits that Soviet citizens received—that still remains today.

Also, if you use the word democracy in a survey question, support for democracy is often lower in Russia than in comparable countries. But that has less to do with the Soviet legacy than with the legacy of the 1990s, which was so difficult for so many.

If you ask Russians about the individual components of democracy, then they're very supportive. About free speech, about having multiparty elections. Yes. Eighty percent of Russians support that. About the right to protest. Yes. We should have the right to protest. Should there be turnover in government at high levels? Yes. But when you use the term democracy, they often associate that with the 1990s and respond negatively. And, of course, President Putin has done a lot to reinforce that idea.

So, history matters. But we need to be careful about making broad claims about how values get passed down from generation to generation.

Udensiva-Brenner: One study you cite looked at the lasting effects of Stalinist repression on voter turnout. Can you talk about that?



Pictured: Moscow protest commemorating the fifth anniversary of the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov; February 29, 2020.

Frye: There's a fascinating piece by Roya Talibova and Yuri Zhukov, where they scoured the archives for the degree of repression in each different district in Russia during 1936, '37, and '38. They found a correlation between the level of repression and the participation rates in elections in Russia in the 1990s. The higher the level of repression, the lower the level of voting. That doesn't explain all the participation rates—people vote for all kinds of reasons—but they did find that this historical factor had a systematic relationship with participation rates and voting rates in the 1990s.

Why that is, it's hard to say. It needs to be explored further to understand whether this was an effect that was passed down generation to generation. Or, if it is because the more active part of the population was repressed and is no longer present in these districts. That's something that needs further research, but it's the kind of research I like to highlight, because it's not the kind of thing that people would normally seek out to understand the effects of the Great Terror and repression.

Udensiva-Brenner: Another claim that you take issue with in the book is that to understand Russians, you have to read Russian literature. I've actually heard that a lot, including in our oral history project; Ambassador Jack Matlock talks a lot about how his knowledge of Russian literature really helped him to negotiate with Gorbachev to end the Cold War. I am curious to hear your thoughts on that, because obviously it's a complicated thing. It's not black and white.

Frye: I was a Russian language and literature major. I still read Russian literature as much as I can, and it's

invaluable in informing us about the great moral dilemmas that persist over time.

But as a guide to how Russians see the world, it's not great, in part, because you can pick and choose any story from Russian literature to make a point and its opposite. On the one hand, you have stories of Russian peasants who are submissive and just willing to take whatever is given to them. They're being beaten by their masters. And that's why we see Russians liking this strong hand and being willing to suffer through even terrible governance. But we also have stories where the peasants rise up and protest and stories of how the barons live in fear that there's going to be a peasant revolt.

So, depending on what types of stories you want to tell, you can dig in all the richness of Russian literature and support a variety of different kinds of arguments. More fatalistic versus agency-based stories. I just want to say, we need to be careful about overgeneralizing based on something we've read. After all, Russian literature, Soviet literature, is not all of one piece.

Udensiva-Brenner: One thing that really surprised me reading your book was that, when surveyed, Russians don't see being a great power as a very important thing except during the annexation of Crimea period. If you had asked me, based on anecdotal evidence I would have said, absolutely, Russians want to be a great power. But according to the research you discuss in your book, that perception seems to be misguided.

Frye: This is a great point, because if you ask Russians whether Russia is a great power, 80 percent of Russians will say yes. And 80 percent will say

that Russia should be a great power. But asking people a question like that is misleading, because being a great power also has costs.

Levada Center has asked this very nice question: Would you rather be a great power that other countries fear, but not the most economically developed country, or would you rather be an economically developed country, but not one that is greatly feared? And the data shows that, often by a significant margin, Russians would prefer economic development over a more assertive foreign policy that tries to make Russia a great power.

Udensiva-Brenner: You've been running a research center at the Higher School of Economics for the past 10 years or more. Can you talk about how that shaped your view of Russia and what's been happening there?

Frye: It's really been a great opportunity over the last decade to run the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development at the Higher School of Economics (HSE). It's part of a government program to try to raise the international rating of the HSE. The ratings haven't increased as fast as initially planned, but there has been improvement. The Center has also been a great opportunity for non-Russian graduate students and for younger scholars working in the field to have a base in Moscow where they can go attend seminars and conferences.

An area where we haven't been as successful is in affecting policy. Initially, we had projects on policy making in Russia, where we hoped to provide some policy advice. For example, the Moscow city government has a program giving money to firms to promote exports. And we approached

it with the opportunity to evaluate whether this was having the desired effect. But as relations between Russia and the West became more fractious, our opportunities to do anything like that just dried up.

Also, the NGO sector has really shrunk in Russia. That's difficult, because in many countries, NGOs are very good partners for academic research. They often have expertise on particular policy issues that academics lack, and they're good partners to work with on particular projects, but that too has become very difficult. At the same time, we've been able to collect a really impressive database of political and economic indicators across Russia's regions over the last 20 years. We've been able to collect a lot of interesting voting data and public opinion data that our scholars continually mine, and that's been great.

Udensiva-Brenner: When you first started the Center you were working on a project about police corruption in Russia, and you mention in the book that you wouldn't delve into a topic like that now. Can you elaborate?

Frye: When we first opened the Center in 2011, President Medvedev had pushed through a reform of the police that required them to hold public meetings as police forces often do in other countries. We wanted to study whether holding these meetings increased trust in the police. That effort did not come to fruition. But that's the kind of topic that we would not even go near now.

The Higher School of Economics is in a difficult position. It's a pretty international institution. Its students have been active at various times and at various protests, which has caught the



*Pictured: Russian matryoshka dolls.
Photo by Alina Grubnyak via Unsplash.*

attention of those who do not want to see protests.

The general atmosphere in Russia has made it harder to recruit scholars who don't already have a deep commitment to studying Russia. In 2013 the Higher School of Economics was able to recruit some very promising recent Ph.D.'s from the University of Illinois and from the University of Pennsylvania by giving them a generous research package.

Those efforts have become much more difficult. Russia itself has become a much less attractive place for scholars. That's been a real loss.

Udensiva-Brenner: One of the personal anecdotes in your book is about your one and only face-to-face meeting with an oligarch. Can you talk about that—how that came about and what happened?

Frye: Yes. A Russian oligarch was interested in building a research institute that would be a joint Russian-American effort to study ways of promoting interethnic tolerance, which is a worthy ideal. Through an intermediary, he contacted me. At the time I was the director of the Harriman Institute, which would have been a good partner for such an endeavor. It's not something we've done before, but it was something that I was interested in at least exploring.

So, I was picked up in a car, and we drove out from the center of Moscow—out to the oligarch's dacha past Rublyovka, past the shops of Dolce & Gabbana and the Mercedes dealerships that are located out in the middle of the forest.

We discussed this project. There were numerous difficulties, and the conversation didn't go very far. But one of the most fascinating things that

happened during the dinner was that he received a call from the incoming minister of industry—the new Russian government had just been sworn in—just to say hello. The minister wanted to tell this oligarch that he was thinking about him, which I thought was a sign of who was really calling the shots in that relationship.

After dinner, we retreated to the yard of this oligarch, and we were drinking tea and having sweets and enjoying the late Moscow summer night. And, as I was leaving, the governor of the district where the oligarch's largest economic asset was held was coming in the door. We kind of bumped into each other, and I thought, wow, this shows that the Russian state really cares about its oligarchy. It would be great if ordinary Russians received the same kind of attention as my acquaintance, the oligarch, received.

Udensiva-Brenner: I really liked this story and the other personal anecdotes in the book. Do you think you would write another nonacademic book in the future?

Frye: Yes, I would like to do that. I've thought about going back and writing about the late 1980s and early 1990s when I was spending a lot of time in the Soviet Union and Russia. It's a remarkable period that we're still learning about, and it's still a topic of contemporary political discussion, because Putin's attempts to shore up his position have often involved invoking the instability of the late 1980s and the 1990s. It might be worthwhile to delve back into that fascinating period. ■