

**Masha Gessen, *The man without a face:
The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin,***

Riverhead Books, US, ISBN 1594488428, 1 March 2012,
314 pp. , \$27.95

MASHA GESSEN IS a journalist and the author of several previous books, most recently *Perfect Rigor*. Editor of the Russian-language *Snob* magazine, she has contributed to *Vanity Fair*, *The New Republic*, *Granta*, and *Slate*, among other publications.

“If it wasn’t so sad, it would be quite funny” is the idea I can’t get out of my head ever since I’ve closed the book. We can say the same thing about the path Russia took since 1991 to the present day, especially since Vladimir Putin was elected president.

The book was published in March 2012, at the very time Vladimir Putin was reelected president of the Russian Federation, after Dmitri Medvedev’s four-year mandate. Did Masha Gessen know that this would happen when she wrote this book on Putin? We can only assume the answer to this question, relying on the last pages of the book, the epilogue, where Gessen writes about the protests that took place in December 2011 and about the hope that things will change for the better.

This book is an irrefutable proof of courage on behalf of the author, as she tries to walk us through Putin’s entire life, writing about his friends and parents. Testifying for the risk taken by writing such a book is also the fact that Masha Gessen wasn’t present in the United States of America when it came out, hiding in Russia for her own safety as the book wasn’t even translated in Russian. Her work comes to tell us, the whole world, that Russia wasn’t and isn’t a democratic state. The process of democratization was stopped for good once Putin rose to power.

Gessen brings serious accusations against Putin, not referring to the presidential administration, the Government or the Parliament (Duma), but to the direct orders given by the president, orders most often unknown even to the Prime Minister. Thus, Gessen explains the resignation, in 2004, of Prime Minister Kasyanov before Putin’s second mandate. Kasyanov learns from Putin, personally, that the richest man in Russia, Mikhail Khodorkovsky has been arrested, dispossessed and has lost his private company Yukos

for having financed other political parties, particularly the Communist Party, and not due to tax evasion, as it had been officially stated.

Special attention was given to Putin's relation to the Russian billionaire, exiled in London, Boris Berezovsky. A few days after Berezovsky passed away on the 23rd of March 2013, Masha Gessen published the entire interview she had taken a few years back. In Gessen's opinion, Berezovsky was exaggerating his influence in Putin's rise to power, as he continued to believe himself a „kingmaker” and tried to maintain this impression, making use of his actions against Putin, financing his opponents, hoping he would succeed in making another king. And all this after Berezovsky was forced to flee the country three months after Putin's inauguration as president.

The worst accusation Gessen brings against the president of the Russian Federation is terrorism, a theory supported by other authors too. Gessen feels that the terrorist bomb attacks in various buildings across several Russian cities that took place in 1999 were in fact organized by the FSB, with the direct involvement of president Putin, and not by the Chechen terrorist as the official story reported. These attacks served as a reason for the restart of the war with the Chechen Republic and led directly to Putin's election as president, especially after his speech following the attacks, speech given when he was Prime Minister during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin. These were then followed by the hostage takeover in the Moscow theatre and the Beslan school, during which over 430 people lost their lives, following the actions of the Special Forces who then valued, above everything else, the taking out of the terrorists instead of the lives of the hostages.

Another obsession of Putin's is, as Gessen puts it, a „personal vendetta”, this being the main reason why those who stood up against the president or his methods lost their lives. Among them, we only know a few names, namely those who became known outside Russia as opponents of the regime, such as political activists, journalists, businessmen etc. Among them are Alexander Litvinenko, Anna Politkovskaia, Anatoly Sobchak, Galina Starovoitova and many others.

In the meantime, one of Putin's most praised qualities was honesty. Berezovsky claimed he had been impressed by Putin because he had been the only bureaucrat who didn't ask for bribe. Yet Marina Salye accuses him of money laundering, tens of millions of dollars from the budget of the city of Sankt Petersburg when Sobchak was mayor, leaving an entire city to starve. Also, no one can say for sure what were Putin's concerns during the years 1991-1999, until he became Prime Minister, what were his duties while working for Sobchak, while working in the administration of President Boris Yeltsin, except for the period when he was in charge of the FSB.

Who is Mr. Putin? was the question put by the moderator of the Russian Panel at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland to Chubais on the 26th of January

2000, question to which he was unable to answer, question that remains unanswered even today. The reason is simple. Putin was a solution to a crisis for Yeltsin and his entourage. Their situation can be described in the following words: “Imagine you have a country and no one to run it. This was the predicament that Boris Yeltsin and his inner circle thought they face in 1999.” This is the reason why at the beginning no one cared who Putin was, as long as they were sure he would remain loyal. The few things we know with certainty about Vladimir Putin were revealed due to an initiative by Berezovsky in 2000, when several journalists were tasked with writing his biography. Of course, only the details that were wanted to be known were published. However, one thing is certain. Even as a young man, Vladimir Putin exhibited violent tendencies which were not easily tempered. Due to his aggressive behaviour in childhood he was dismissed from the Pioneers, and was later involved in numerous incidents. However, this began to change as soon as he started to take up Sambo, the result being a control over his impulses rather than a complete renunciation of an aggressive behaviour.

Speaking about Putin, Masha Gessen brings up a new issue, mainly a mental disease, pleonexia: “the insatiable desire to have what rightfully belongs to others”, one illustrative incident being an event in 2005 when Putin tried on a 124-diamond Super Bowl ring belonging to New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft and then literally pocketed it.

Masha Gessen began her investigation, whose results we see in this book, in 1998, together with her friend and mentor, Galina Starovoitova. The results were accompanied by a string of investigations on other events and assassinations from the period 1998-2011. It all started with the publishing of some articles that detailed Gessen’s investigation, which would later turn into the book: *The man without a face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*.

This book brings forth new details on Putin’s way of action, on those we suffered because they believed they could change something. Some succeeded to leave Russia, while others are still in prisons, not knowing whether they will ever come out (definitely not during the actual regime). Still, what Gessen tells us is that a change, however much needed, is also possible, maybe not now, but in 5 years, when Putin’s mandate expires. This was clear during the protests of December 2011, when tens of thousands of people came out to the street to express their disagreement with the election results and Putin’s policy. Also, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev urges for change and reform, having declared to RIA Novosti on the 30th of March, that: „The authorities have managed to beat down the protest wave but the problems remain. If nothing changes, they will escalate, which means that Russian society will make a new attempt to move to real democracy.”

Ana GNATIUC*

* 2nd year graduate student, MA programme International Communication, Department of International Studies and Contemporary History, Babeş-Bolyai University.