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Legitimizing Autocracy: Understanding Regime Survival Strategies in Putin's Russia

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This study focuses on the legitimation of Putin's rule in Russia through the construction of the enemy images and external threats.

The fact that Russian president Vladimir Putin's recent efforts at tailoring the Russian Constitution to his re-election have not run into public resistance, suggests that "Putinism" remains significantly popular with Russians. A question arises as to what specific factors are maintaining Putin's popularity amid excessive crackdown on civil liberties and political freedoms across Russia (Freedom House, 2019).

This provokes an inquiry into the survival strategies of the authoritarian regimes, with a focus on the external sources of their legitimacy. Legitimacy is frequently associated with regime survival,

given that it functions as an alternative resource of support for incumbents in turbulent times (Mazepus, et al 2016, p. 352).

Lipset (1959) defines legitimacy as the "the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society" (Lipset, 1959, p. 86). Authoritarian legitimacy has attracted a lot of academic attention and is largely viewed as something critical that non-democratic rulers seek to acquire or develop through their legitimation claims, symbols, and narratives (Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2017, p. 253). Huntington (1991) notes that Western democratic systems are less dependent on performance legitimacy than authoritarian systems, as failure is blamed on the incumbents instead of the system, and the ouster and replacement of the incumbents help to renew the system (Huntington 1991, p. 27).

Moreover, the rulers in authoritarian regimes tend to rely heavily on external sources of legitimation, not least through appealing to enemy images and "accusing outside forces of causing every problem that arises on the domestic front" (Shakrai, 2015, p. 33). Middens notes that "The threat of enemies justifies actions that might otherwise be unacceptable or illegal... Enemies serve as a focus for aggression and as a means of diverting attention from pressing internal problems" (Terzyan, 2020a).

One of the most frequently observed functions of the enemy images is the potential to mobilize for or against an idea or a specific group. Indeed, the mobilizing power of the enemies and external

threats would potentially have legitimizing and justifying effects on a government's even most disputed and unpopular policies. The "rhetoric of insecurity" suggested by Cambell, seems to accurately capture the basic functions of the enemy images. According to this rhetoric, the state policies are legitimized through the attempt to instill notions of insecurity (Campbell, 1998).

To trigger the emotions of fear, the enemy must be portrayed as aggressive, dangerous, threatening, immoral and unreliable. In effect, enemy images and related stereotypes are often characterized by the claim that the enemy has aggressive and evil intentions and is led by a centralized and monolithic leadership that would be capable of carrying out intricate conspiracies (Hermann, 2003, p. 289). The "evilization" is inherently linked to one of the most frequently observed functions of the enemy images – mobilization of population against the "Other" (Shakrai, 2015, p. 34). This has much to do with the rally- around- the- flag effect that can generate long-lasting public support- conducive to sustaining authoritarian regimes.

Not surprisingly, it has not been uncommon for Putin to legitimate his regime through exaggerating external threats, emanating particularly from the West. Moreover, the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine has been positively correlated with the othering of the West in Kremlin's discourse.

Some of the characteristics attributed to Western governments by Putin include hypocrisy, Russophobia, lack of moral integrity, recklessness, etc. (Szostek and Hutchings 2015, p. 185).

Clearly, the relationship between Moscow and Washington has reached its nadir since the end of the Cold War, and by December 2014 the concept of an "iron curtain," separating East and West was again put forward, at least in some analyst circles. Igor Ivanov, Putin's first foreign minister, even suggested that the crisis in Ukraine is more dangerous than the Cold War**,** as there still is no mutually acceptable mechanism to prevent military clashes (Black and Johns, 2016, p. 227). Furthermore, Putin would regard the "coup d'état" in Ukraine as a manifestation of a deeper issue of the resurgence of "Nazism" and "fascism" in Europe: "those who stood behind the latest events in Ukraine resorted to terror, murder and riots. Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites executed this coup. They continue to set the tone in Ukraine to this day" (Kremlin, 2014). The references to the revival of fascism would be followed by the claim, that as a pivotal actor in defeating fascism through World War II, Russia had a crucial mission of preventing its resurgence in Europe.

Interestingly, some Russian analysts tend to claim that Cold War thinking never went away from Western perceptions of international relations, and even see that as part of the crisis outbreak in Ukraine (Black and Johns, 2016).

Consistent with such contentions, Putin has tended to accuse the USA of the devastation unleashed on Ukraine. In Putin's words, Washington's goal is to "remake the whole world" around its own interests and thus to impose a "unilateral diktat" on the rest of the world. Therefore, the crisis in Ukraine was framed an unsurprising

consequence of the United States and NATO's hostile and anti-Russian policies. "… They continue their policy of expanding NATO. What for?" (Washingtonpost, 2015).

While blaming the devastating crisis on the United States the Kremlin has tended to contend that fomenting instability in Ukraine is a part of policy, that aims to drive a wedge between the two brotherly nations. Moreover, Putin has repeatedly stated that "Russians and Ukrainians are one people" (Trenin, 2018). Thus, the Kremlin's discourse suggests that had not the United States of America and European Union made every effort to undermine the Russian-Ukrainian relations, there would have been no considerable frictions between the two brotherly nations.

Putin has invariably accused the United States and European Union of their inherently anti-Russian policies, manifested particularly in their double standards on Crimea's "self-determination." "We keep hearing from the United States and Western Europe that Kosovo is some special case. What makes it so special in the eyes of our colleagues? …This is not even double standards; this is amazing, primitive, blunt cynicism" (Kremlin, 2014).

Along with activating the Cold War narratives and stereotypes associated with the United States and its policy towards Russia, it has not been uncommon for Putin to treat Washington as "intellectually inferior" and "reckless" that suffers from "imperial adventurism and lacks strategic foresight. This specifically applies to "reckless" sanctions imposed on Russia that among others, undermined trust in

the dollar as the world's universal currency. "It's a typical mistake of an empire," said Putin and concluded, that with its countless strategic mistakes, the USA is accelerating the end of its global dominance (Abcnews, 2018). Essentially, by pointing to the acute threats emanating from the USA, he would strive to trigger rally-around-the-flag effect across the Russian population and focus their attention on the necessity of defeating the "dangerous" but "reckless" rival.

Moreover, the pronounced emphasis on standing up to the West has served as a convenient pretext to suppress dissent and pluralism across the two country by labelling civic and opposition activists as "anti-Russian spies," or "foreign agents," "traitors," who are involved in the "Western conspiracies" (Yablokov, 2018).

Beyond all these, Putin has tended to undermine the very idea of political opposition, by implicitly representing it as an anti-state force backed by anti-Russian forces. Namely, in response to a question about opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Putin stated that Russians "do not want second edition of today's Ukraine for Russia." (France24, 2017). As noted earlier, the Russian President would frame the Maidan Revolution as a sign of "fascism revival." Such examples would help point to the hypothetical future of a strong opposition, that would soon or late become a "foreign agent" and cause instability. It turns out that considerable part of Russian population tends to share Putin's stances on opposition. Remarkably, a Levada-Centre survey on the necessity of political opposition shows that around 54 percent of respondents thought Russia needed one, while a quarter found it

obsolete (Levada, 2016). The reasons given by the second group come down to fears about internal divisions and instability that a strong opposition can cause (Levada, 2016).

The escalation of conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea produced rally-around-the-flag effect since Putin's approval rating increased to over 85 despite Western crippling economic sanctions (Terzyan, 2020). Frequent appeals to the external threats have been accompanied by a heightened emphasis on the necessity of strong presidential power, with a "strongman," who can withstand the enemy's conspiracies. This discourse has reached a point, where Putin's stay in office is perceived as essential for defending national borderlines. Not surprisingly, in March Russia's Constitutional Court approved amendments that could enable Putin to stay in power for another 16 years.

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