The Anatomy of the Authoritarian Rule in Russia: Mainstream and Critical Perspectives

Aram Terzyan

Abstract

This paper focuses on the anatomy of the authoritarian rule in Russia with a focus on the core external and internal factors that determine the steady survival of the Putin regime. The findings suggest that the reasons for persisting autocracy range from limited reach of international/Western influence to fragility of civil society, compounded by the Kremlin's extensive crackdown on civil society. Apart from injecting the latter with nationalism and loyalty to the regime, the Kremlin has consistently strived to undermine the very idea of liberal democracy. The latter has been reduced to the acceptance of radical minority rights, that endanger national identity and traditional values. Moreover, it has not been uncommon for Putin to legitimate his regime through exaggerating external threats posed particularly by the West. 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 enemies' conspiracies.

Keywords: Russia; "Putinism"; authoritarian rule; democratization; civil society.

Introduction

There is a broad consensus among the students of Russian politics that the Russian regime is inherently autocratic and personalistic (Fish 2017, p. 61). As a matter of fact, the post-Soviet transition in Russia has been marred by a series of authoritarian malpractices, ranging from centralization and personalization of power to extensive crackdown on civil liberties and political freedoms (Freedom House 2019a). As a result, the consensus of scholarly analyses in the West concludes that, if Russia did enter a transition to democracy, that transition was not successful (Evans, 2011, p. 40).

One of the biggest questions regarding the anatomy of the authoritarian rule in Russia involves explaining the core external and internal factors, that determine the steady survival of the Putin regime.

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. That said, there is little ground for optimism about possible democratic reforms in Russia.

Summarizing numerous scholarly debates and findings Gelman (2015) divides the major factors of successful democratization into structure-induced and agency-driven ones (p. 28).

While structure-induced factors (socio-economic, cultural, ethno-religious, etc.) serve mostly as predictors of the probability of democratization, actor-driven logic outlines the

mechanisms that may—or may not—turn a nondemocratic regime into a democracy. This study focuses on these mechanisms, including the impact of external and internal factors in shaping the Russian regime outputs, along with the survival strategies of the incumbent regime.

Building on the existing literature, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the literature conceptualize the Russian regime?

2. What factors are identified in the literature that explain the failure of democratization in Russia?

3. What are the theoretical perspectives on the survival strategies of the authoritarian rule in Russia?

This paper does not pretend to be able to explain the anatomy of "Putinism" in Russia and evaluate its effectiveness. Instead, it focuses on the main factors outlined by the existing literature that aim to account for the bigger picture of the main features of the authoritarian rule in Russia.

Limited reach of the international/Western influence

According to widely held beliefs, the international influence on Russian politics has been negligible since the break-up of the Soviet Union (Gelman, 2015). Indeed, it is not surprising for the largest area of the globe, with its huge resources and potential to be immune to outside pressure.

While in early 1990s the West would be treated as a symbol of a high level of socioeconomic development by a significant part of the Russian elite and the wider society, the anti-western attitudes started to pick up steam during Vladimir Putin's presidency. The latter marked a shift from 'liberal ideas' to geopolitical and particularly pragmatic geo-economic realism in the Russian political thinking (Thorun, 2009, p. 28). As a result, instead of treating the West as a "role model" Putin resorted to othering it, thus leading to the establishment of an opposing ideology to the Western/European one based on Russian ethnic nationalism, conservative values and the Russian Orthodox church. This new ideology and the increasingly anti-Western rhetoric contribute significantly to substantial othering of Russia and its portrayal as Europe's "Other" in European political thinking (Neumann, 2013). Thus, Russia is deemed to be defining itself as a rival to the EU and possibly constructing a Eurasian identity manifested in the creation of the Eurasian Union (Stefansson, 2015, pp. 20-21).

Not surprisingly, the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine has been viewed as a manifestation of "clash of civilizations" between Russia and Europe and their Eurasian and European visions of the common neighborhood. The Ukrainian revolution is deemed to herald the end of the post-Cold war settlement that vanished the hopes of Euro-Russian integration (Shevtsova, p. 2014). That said, instead of joining the Western civilization, Russia positioned itself as its "Other" and resorted to what Delcour and Wolczuk refer to as alternative region building or region-spoiling measures aimed at securing its regional hegemony (p. 187).

Overall, the setbacks endured in the EU-Russia relations over the last decade provoke an inquiry into the rationale behind their conflictual visions that played a part in the othering of Europe in Russian political thinking.

Studies show that in early 2000s Russia would not fiercely resist to the EU's rapprochement with its near neighborhood, as it would do when it comes to NATO. Rather, Russia tended to indicate considerable interest in developing partnership with the EU, centering on but not limited to energy and trade (Delcour and Kostanyan, 2014. p. 2).

While the EU granted Russia the role of special 'strategic partner', Brussels and its institutions would be the 'unipole' with Russia envisaged as a recipient of norms, values and best practices promoted by the EU (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2013, pp. 163-164). This was absolutely consistent with Russia's ambition to join the 'community of civilized states' and set up a comprehensive system of collective security in Europe as an antidote to dividing lines and polarization. Yet, Delcour and Kostanyan note that the partnership developed between the EU and Russia in the 2000s was underpinned by false premises and misperceptions (Delcour and Kostanyan, pp. 2-3). The EU would take for granted the assumption that Russia would unequivocally share its values by adopting the Western liberal standards of democracy and the market economy, and thus becoming a democratic and reliable partner. Meanwhile, the core assumption dominating the Kremlin's political thinking was that the EU's weak security actorness and its low profile in the post-Soviet space would impair its ability to compete with Russia in its neighborhood (Delcour and Kostanyan, 2014, pp. 2-3)

The first major setback in the EU-Russia relations was the introduction of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 – largely perceived as detrimental to Russian interests by the Kremlin. Moreover, the fear of losing its influence in its 'backyard' amidst 'color revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine, and the EU's alarming engagement, prompted Russia into taking

'preventive' measures. Notably, given their 'anti-post-soviet' nature, there has been a tendency to regard the post-soviet revolutions as major international setbacks to Putin's Russia (Finkel and Brudny, 2012). Russia's efforts at keeping its "near abroad' in the orbit of its authoritarian influence, did not resonate particularly with Georgian and Ukrainian societies, determined to overcome post-soviet authoritarianism and stand up for their "European choice" (Cameron and Orenstein, 2012).

Clearly, the inauguration of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2008 reinforced Russia's worst fears about the EU's 'expansionist agenda' and put it in the same category as 'hostile' NATO in Kremlin's political thinking. Essentially, by offering Eastern neighbors Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) and Association Agreements (AAs), the EU was deemed to be making significant strides in 'absorbing' them into its ranks. Russia's mounting assertiveness has been vividly manifested in its intensifying efforts at promoting its preferred vision of order beyond its borders in the form of the Customs Union launched in 2010 and evolving into Eurasian Economic Union in 2015.

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine –significantly owing to country's European choice reveals the growing confrontation between the European and Eurasian projects.

When viewed from Brussels, the Eastern Partnership has marked a new phase of the EU's 'constructive engagement' in its neighborhood, with the view to transforming it into an area of democracy, peace and prosperity (Haukkala, 2018, p. 84). Meanwhile, the Kremlin would treat the Eastern Partnership as European intrusion in its 'sphere of influence', as for Russia, converging with the acquis means a shift away from what ties EaP countries have with Moscow (Delcour and Kostanyan, 2014, p. 3). It is for these reasons that Putin threw his back behind promoting the Eurasian Union, most vividly by making every effort to ensure Ukraine's alignment with the union.

Finding itself at the intersection of the exclusionary integration projects the Ukrainian society confirmed its "European choice" and a fervent desire to join the European family of democracies.

Shevtsova notes that the pro-EU, democratic movement in Ukraine heightened Putin regime's fears about its possible spillover into Russia, amid lingering concerns about recurrence of large-scale post-election protests that erupted in 2011 (p. 74). In response, Putin resorted to reinforcing personalistic leadership, sparing no effort to undermine Western influence over its "near neighborhood" (Shevtsova, 2014, p. 74). It follows that the crisis in Ukraine stems from

Russia's struggle to control Ukraine and keep it in the orbit of its authoritarian influence, as opposed to the Ukrainians' "choice for Europe" (Ibid).

Some observers go even further, by contending that the chances of democratization across a vast swath of Eurasia seem slimmer now, than ever before in the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin's crackdown on liberal-democratic forces at home and abroad (Diuk, 2014, p. 83). This line of thinking presumes that the Kremlin has a strong interest in ensuring that regional and global democratic trends do not affect grip on the Russian political system and that the legitimacy of democracy promotion and regime change are subverted (Roberts and Ziemer, p. 152). Thus, instead of embracing democratic values, Russia is deemed to be posing threats to liberal democracies by rolling back democracy around the world and bringing down democratic governments in its neighborhood and beyond (Ambrosio, 2007).

Therefore, while the international influence seems unlikely to make the Russian political system more democratic, there are concerns that the Kremlin has the potential to adversely affect democracy promotion in its 'near neighborhood' and beyond.

Between a fragile civil society and "sovereign democracy"

While a vibrant civil society is largely viewed as a key component of a democratic society and a crucial instrument for political change, the Russian civil society organizations have been characterized by organizational weakness, and marginality in terms of their social base, financial assets and influence over policy making (Evans, 2011, p. 46).

Evans (2011) notes that this picture has much to do with the cultural legacy of the Soviet system with pervasive distrust of social organizations and even of the whole public sphere (p. 46). Indeed, it has not been uncommon for post-Soviet societies to perceive civic associations as threat to the power and stability of the state together with the conviction that the state bears the responsibility for the wellbeing of the Society. Meanwhile, the Putin regime has further reinforced such perceptions to thwart civic activism and prevent it from evolving into an issue-specific, value-driven and a robust civil society. In essence, mass participation and public involvement has played a negligible role in Russian politics since the break-up of the Soviet Union, with some minor exceptions, including the wave of mass anti-government protests in 2011–2012 (Gelman, 2015, p. 38).

Moreover, even the 'color revolutions' in Russia's neighborhood did not appear to 'inspire' the Russian activists by prompting them into action. Rather, the 'color revolutions', and especially the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, served as a wake-up call for Putin's regime and prompted the Kremlin into taking all possible counter-revolutionary measures. The result was the emergence of a mobilizational authoritarian regime during Putin's second term (Hovarth, 2011).

To thwart the perceived color revolution threat, Russian authorities adopted strategies that combined a political, administrative, and intellectual assault on the opposition and Western ideas of democracy promotion (Finkel and Brudny, 2012, p. 15).

An integral part of this assault was, first, an attempt to create a mass youth movement, Nashi, as a counterweight to the various youth movements that were the driving forces behind the 'color revolutions' in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. Nashi, the independent youth democratic anti-fascist movement emerged in 2005 as a pro-regime support group. Some observers read it as Putin's Russia's one of the most controversial projects, with its mass actions and youth in uniforms evoking memories of the Soviet Komsomol (Hemment, 2015, p. 73).

While pretending to be an independent youth movement, Nashi was state-run, with inherently anti-Western and anti-liberal ideas. Nashi was claiming to adhere to seemingly incompatible values, combining the elements of democratic discourse and global youth culture with nationalism and "moral framework" of the Russian Orthodox Church (Hemment, 2015, pp. 72-73). Even though Nashi's priorities would considerably change over time in response to Kremlin's shifting priorities, it did not cross the line of a pro-regime counter-revolutionary movement, aimed at filling the public space with nationalism and loyalty to the regime.

As a result, Nashi would passionately support the Putin regime, not least through countering anti-Putin opposition demonstrations in Moscow in December 2011 (Atwal and Bacon, 2011).

Not surprisingly, Nashi would be widely regarded as evidence of an anti-democratic backlash and as confirmation of Russia's resurgent authoritarianism (Hemment, 2012, p. 234). That said, Nashi had nothing to do with a democratic civil society and served as a tool for controlling public space and countering the opposition (p. 234).

Beyond that, the Kremlin has consistently strived to delegitimize the idea of liberal democracy itself, labelling it subversive and alien to the Russian national character (Finkel and Brudny, 2012, p. 15).

Putin tends to contend that the ideology underpinning Western democracies for decades has "outlived its purpose". Thus, "the liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population" (Putin, 2019).

Ironically, liberal democracy has been reduced to the acceptance of homosexual rights, hailed by the Russian president as a "genderless and fruitless tolerance" that allows "good and evil" to be valued as equal (Putin, 2013).

Essentially, the West and particularly Europe have been regarded as a purely LGBT-promoting communities that endanger national identities and traditional values in the post-Soviet countries and beyond. In Putin's words the liberals have been attempting to dictate anything to anyone, thus overshadowing the culture, traditions and traditional family values of millions of people making up the core population (Putin, 2019).

Therefore, Putin has positioned Russia as a counter-hegemonic force opposed to the West's "crackdown" on conservative values and even world's last bastion of traditional values, characterized by its rejection of revolutions, homosexuality and feminism (Orlova, 2018, pp. 63-65).

Apart from encouraging homophobia, this rhetoric has led to the further misrepresentation of liberal democracy -often contrasted with Russian "sovereign democracy." Remarkably, the narratives that underpin Putin's discourse have proven popular with the Russian population. According to a survey conducted by the state-run Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, nearly two-thirds of Russians believe that homosexuals are conspiring to subvert the country's traditional values (Terzyan, 2020). Moreover, they believe in the existence of an organization that strives to destroy Russian spiritual values through imposing radical minority norms on the country's majority (Ibid).

Such perceptions allowed Putin to strengthen his "strongman" image, with the president not allowing the Western liberals to weaken Russia. This rhetoric is not uncommon in authoritarian regimes, where leaders seek to strengthen their popularity by exploiting nationalism, exaggerating external threats, and manipulating the media.

The necessity of standing up to the West has served as a convenient pretext to suppress dissent and pluralism across the country by labelling civic and opposition activists as "anti-Russian spies," "foreign agents" or "traitors," who are involved in "Western conspiracies" (Duacé, 2015).

Moreover, the Russian government passed several laws aimed at shrinking the public space by stigmatizing the core of the liberal-reform movement as "foreign agents" fighting against traditional Russian values (Wilkinson, 2014).

Beyond all these, Putin has tended to undermine the very idea of political opposition, by implicitly representing it as an anti-state force that causes instability, rife with devastation. 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" (Putin, 2017). Meanwhile, the Russian president would frame the Maidan Revolution as a sign of "fascism revival," asserting that those who stood behind the latest events in Ukraine are nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites (Putin, 2014a).

Such examples would help point to the hypothetical future of a strong opposition, that would soon or late strive to stage a devastating revolution. It turns out that considerable part of Russian population tends to share Putin's stances opposition. Remarkably, a Levada-Centre survey on the necessity of political opposition found that 54 percent of respondents thought Russia needed one, while a quarter disagreed with such ideas (Levada, 2016). Reasons given by the second group against the concept of political opposition ranged from concerns regarding internal divisions to its perceived detrimental effects on the country's general stability (Levada, 2016).

Overall, respondents possessed largely negative and pessimistic understandings of the official opposition in Russia, describing it as weak, marginalized, fragmented and even a 'dying species'.

Even a quick glance of the Duma presents an unfavorable picture of a fragmented opposition, divided by communist, nationalist, and liberal ideologies. Ironically, only a shared distrust by the public appears to unite these groups, with respondents often associating the parliamentary opposition with terms such as "fake opposition", "rubber stamp opposition" and even "pro-regime" (Terzyan, 2020).

As a result, at this point there seems to be no considerable hindrance to Putin's plan to stay in office.

Sustaining the authoritarian rule through external threats

It has not been uncommon for Putin regime to legitimate itself through exaggerating external threats, emanating particularly from the West. Essentially, the rulers in authoritarian regimes tend to rely heavily on external sources of legitimation, not least through "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" (Middens, 1990).

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, 1992).

To trigger the emotions of fear, the enemy must be portrayed as aggressive, dangerous, threatening, 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, 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.

Notably, 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 activated, at least in some analyst circles. Igor Ivanov, Putin's first foreign minister, even suggests 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'etat" 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" (Putin, 2014a). 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 disappeared from Western interpretations 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 (Putin, 2014b). Thus, the crisis in Ukraine was framed an unsurprising consequence of the United States and NATO's anti-Russian policies. "… They continue their policy of expanding NATO. What for? If the Warsaw Bloc stopped its existence, the Soviet Union have collapsed (ph) and, nevertheless, the NATO continues expanding as well as its military infrastructure. Then they offered the poor Soviet countries a false choice: either to be with the West or with the East. Sooner or later, this logic of confrontation was bound to spark off a grave geopolitical crisis. This is exactly what happened in Ukraine, where the discontent of population with the current authorities was used and the military coup was orchestrated from outside — that triggered a civil war as a result" (Putin, 2015).

Essentially, the main goal of the Kremlin propaganda is to blame all major problems facing the country on the "Western Imperialism," most vividly manifested in the United States' "conspiracies" against Russia. While blaming the devastating crisis on the United States, the Kremlin has tended to contend that fomenting instability in Ukraine is a part of the policy, that aims to drive a wedge between the two brotherly nations and weaken Russia (Trenin, 2018).

In effect, the escalation of conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea appeared to produce a rally-around-the-flag effect, since Putin's approval rating increased to over 85 despite Western crippling economic sanctions (Terzyan, 2020). Frequent appeals to external threats have been accompanied by a heightened emphasis on the necessity of strong presidential power, with a

"strongman," who can withstand enemies' 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 2020 Russia's Constitutional Court approved amendments that could enable Putin to stay in power for another 16 years.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to existing literature on the anatomy of the authoritarian rule in Russia. Based on the previous discussion, there are three main concluding observations to make regarding the Russian regime.

First, and in terms of the external drivers of democratization, while in early 1990s the West would be treated as a symbol of a high level of socioeconomic development by a significant part of the Russian elite and the wider society, the anti-western attitudes started to pick up steam during Vladimir Putin's presidency. The latter marked a shift from 'liberal ideas' to geopolitical and particularly pragmatic geo-economic realism in the Russian political thinking. As a result, instead of treating the West as a "role model" Putin resorted to othering it, thus leading to the establishment of an opposing ideology to the Western/European one based on Russian ethnic nationalism, conservative values and the Russian Orthodox church. Not surprisingly, the 2014 Maidan Revolution has been viewed as a manifestation of "clash of civilizations" between Russia and Europe that heralded the end of the post-Cold war settlement - vanishing the hopes of Euro-Russian integration. That said, instead of joining the Western civilization, Russia positioned itself as its "Other" and resorted to alternative region building measures in the form of the Eurasian integration.

Second, and in terms of the internal drivers of democratization, to shield itself from a vibrant civil society and mass mobilization, the Putin regime resorted to tightening its grip on the public space and controlling public narratives on politically sensitive issues. Along with filling the public space with fake democratic movements, such as Nashi, the Putin regime has sought to delegitimize the very ideas of liberal democracy, labelling them alien to the Russian national character. Liberal democracy has been reduced to the acceptance of homosexual rights, while the West has been regarded as a purely LGBT-promoting communities that endanger national identities and traditional values in the post-Soviet countries and beyond. This rhetoric has led to the further misrepresentation of liberal democracy - often contrasted with Russian "sovereign democracy."

Remarkably, the narratives that underpin Putin's discourse have proven popular with the Russian population. Studies show that considerable part of the Russian respondents believe in the existence of an organization that strives to destroy Russian spiritual values through imposing radical minority norms on the country's majority. The necessity of defending national borderlines and upholding national values 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," "foreign agents" or "traitors."

Third, and in terms of regime survival strategies, it has not been uncommon for Putin to legitimate his regime through exaggerating external threats, emanating particularly from the West. The goal of the Kremlin propaganda is to blame all major problems facing the country on the "Western imperialism," most vividly manifested the United States' "conspiracies" against Russia. The escalation of the crisis in Ukraine has provided a fertile ground for activating the Cold War stereotypes of the 'good' East versus the 'bad' West. The latter has been accused of unleashing the devastation with the view to weakening Russia. 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.

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