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

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This study examines the legitimation of Vladimir Putin's rule in Russia through the construction of enemy images and the articulation of external threats. The absence of significant public resistance to President Vladimir Putin's recent constitutional revisions facilitating his continued re-election suggests that "Putinism" retains a substantial degree of societal support. This persistence of popular approval raises an important question: which mechanisms sustain Putin's legitimacy amid the extensive erosion of civil liberties and political freedoms in contemporary Russia (Freedom House, 2019)?

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This study seeks to answer the following research question: how does the construction of external enemies contribute to the legitimation and endurance of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian rule? It argues that enemy images function as a central discursive mechanism through which the Kremlin sustains public support in the absence of democratic accountability. By linking foreign policy narratives to domestic legitimation strategies, this paper contributes to the literature on authoritarianism by highlighting how external threat construction operates not merely as an instrument of international positioning, but as a core pillar of internal regime stability.

In this sense, the article builds on and extends earlier analyses of enemy images in Russian political discourse by situating them within a broader framework of authoritarian legitimation and regime survival (Terzyan, 2020a).

This question directs attention to the broader survival strategies of authoritarian regimes, particularly the external sources of their legitimacy. Legitimacy plays a central role in regime endurance, as it functions as an alternative reservoir of support during periods of economic stagnation, political crisis, or institutional weakness (Mazepus et al., 2016, p. 352). Lipset famously defined legitimacy as "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). Within authoritarian contexts, legitimacy has attracted extensive scholarly attention and is widely understood as something non-democratic rulers actively

construct through symbolic claims, narratives, and discursive practices rather than democratic accountability (Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2017, p. 253). As Huntington observes, unlike democratic systems that can renew legitimacy through leadership turnover, authoritarian regimes depend far more heavily on performance and narrative legitimacy, since political failure threatens the system itself rather than merely its incumbents (Huntington, 1991, p. 27).

A central feature of authoritarian legitimation is reliance on external sources of justification, most notably through the construction of hostile enemy images. Rulers frequently seek to consolidate authority by attributing domestic difficulties to foreign interference, thereby deflecting responsibility and mobilizing societal cohesion against perceived external threats (Shakrai, 2015, p. 33).

The reliance on external enemies as a source of political legitimacy is not unique to Russia, but rather reflects a broader pattern observable across authoritarian regimes. In various non-democratic contexts, ruling elites have historically invoked foreign threats to consolidate power, marginalize opposition, and cultivate social cohesion under conditions of political constraint. What distinguishes the Russian case is the systematic integration of enemy construction into both domestic governance and historical memory, particularly through references to World War II and the Cold War. This comparative perspective underscores that while enemy-based legitimation is a common authoritarian strategy, its resonance and

durability depend heavily on context-specific narratives and collective experiences.

As Terzyan notes, the invocation of enemies enables rulers to legitimize actions that might otherwise appear illegal or unacceptable, while simultaneously diverting attention away from internal governance failures (Terzyan, 2020a). Enemy images thus serve both as instruments of mobilization and as mechanisms of political distraction.

One of the most significant functions of enemy construction lies in its mobilizing potential. External threats can generate legitimizing effects for even the most controversial or unpopular government policies by framing them as necessary responses to danger. Campbell's concept of the "rhetoric of insecurity" aptly captures this dynamic, whereby state policies are justified through the deliberate production of fear and vulnerability (Campbell, 1998). To be effective, the enemy must be portrayed as aggressive, immoral, unpredictable, and existentially threatening. Accordingly, enemy images often rely on stereotypes depicting a monolithic and conspiratorial adversary capable of orchestrating complex plots against the state (Hermann, 2003, p. 289). This process of "evilization" plays a crucial role in mobilizing the population against the constructed "Other" and contributes to the rally-around-the-flag effect that sustains authoritarian rule during crises (Shakrai, 2015, p. 34).

External threats and enemy images are frequently conflated in political discourse, yet they operate differently as tools of authoritarian

legitimation. External threats consist of claims about dangers originating beyond the state, whether military, ideological, or political. Enemy images, by contrast, actively interpret and reshape these claims by attributing intent, responsibility, and moral meaning to external actors. Rather than merely identifying risks, enemy images construct adversaries as purposeful and hostile agents embedded within broader narratives about identity, history, and collective destiny. In this way, threats are not simply described but narratively transformed into intelligible stories of conflict.

This distinction matters because assertions of danger alone rarely generate durable political support. It is the interpretive framing provided by enemy images that renders threats emotionally compelling and politically actionable. By depicting adversaries as coordinated, morally corrupt, and fundamentally opposed to the state's survival, authoritarian narratives simplify complex political environments into stark oppositional categories. Such simplification encourages collective alignment around the regime while narrowing the space for alternative interpretations of political reality.

In authoritarian systems, enemy images also serve a stabilizing function when conventional sources of legitimacy weaken. Unlike democratic regimes, which can absorb policy failure through leadership change and institutional renewal, authoritarian systems face systemic risks when public confidence erodes. Enemy construction allows rulers to redirect public evaluation away from governance outcomes and toward questions of security and survival. The regime's

capacity to endure external pressure becomes a central measure of legitimacy, displacing expectations related to performance, accountability, or inclusion.

Enemy-centered legitimation further reshapes the relationship between foreign policy narratives and domestic political control. External actors are framed not only as geopolitical rivals but as forces actively working to undermine internal order. This framing collapses the distinction between foreign hostility and internal dissent, enabling domestic critics to be discursively linked to external adversaries. As a result, political opposition is no longer presented as a legitimate component of political life but as a security risk requiring containment.

A notable consequence of this process is the restriction of political imagination. By organizing political meaning around existential oppositions, authoritarian discourse limits the range of conceivable futures. Political change is associated with instability, foreign domination, or national disintegration, while continuity is equated with safety and cohesion. Even hypothetical alternatives to incumbent leadership are preemptively discredited, producing compliance not only through coercion but through the erosion of perceived political choice.

The effectiveness of enemy images depends in large part on their integration into historically familiar narratives. When contemporary threats are linked to collective memory, past conflicts, or symbolic victories, they gain emotional depth and moral clarity. This historical resonance allows enemy-based narratives to remain persuasive even

in the absence of immediate confrontation, reinforcing their role as long-term sources of legitimacy.

At the same time, reliance on enemy construction introduces structural vulnerabilities. Sustaining legitimacy through confrontation requires the continuous reproduction of credible threats. If external dangers lose plausibility or fail to justify ongoing economic and social costs, the narrative risks exhaustion. Moreover, by closing off discursive space, the regime reduces its capacity to adapt or acknowledge internal shortcomings without undermining its own legitimacy. These dynamics reveal the central tension of enemy-based legitimation: while it can reinforce authoritarian stability in the short term, it may also deepen long-term fragilities that challenge regime durability.

There is broad agreement among scholars of Russian politics regarding the defining characteristics of the contemporary Russian regime commonly described as "Putinism." This system of rule is widely understood as a form of autocratic governance that is personalistic, conservative, and populist in orientation (Fish 2017, 61). The fact that President Vladimir Putin's constitutional amendments enabling his continued re-election did not provoke significant public resistance suggests that this political model continues to enjoy substantial popular support. This observation raises an important question: which factors sustain Putin's popularity despite the pronounced deterioration of civil liberties and political freedoms in Russia (Freedom House, 2019a)?

One of the most prominent mechanisms through which the Kremlin has sought to legitimate its authority has been the amplification of external threats, particularly those associated with Western actors. The escalation of the conflict in Ukraine coincided with a marked intensification of "othering" in official discourse, in which Western governments were portrayed as hostile, morally compromised, and strategically irresponsible (Szostek and Hutchings 2015, 185).

Relations between Moscow and Washington have sharply deteriorated since the end of the Cold War, reaching what many observers describe as a historic low by late 2014. During this period, analysts increasingly invoked the metaphor of a renewed "iron curtain" separating East and West. Igor Ivanov, Russia's former foreign minister, argued that the Ukrainian crisis posed even greater dangers than the Cold War itself, given the absence of mutually accepted mechanisms for preventing direct military confrontation (Black and Johns 2016, 227).

Within Kremlin discourse, developments in Ukraine were framed not merely as geopolitical rivalry but as evidence of a deeper ideological threat. Putin characterized the events of 2014 as a violent coup orchestrated by nationalists, neo-Nazis, and Russophobes, positioning Russia as a historical and moral bulwark against the alleged revival of fascism in Europe (Kremlin 2014). This framing drew on Russia's role in defeating fascism during World War II and reinforced claims of a special civilizational mission.

Some Russian analysts have further argued that Cold War patterns of thinking never disappeared from Western strategic approaches and that these legacies contributed to the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis (Black and Johns 2016). Consistent with this view, Putin accused the United States of deliberately fostering instability in Ukraine as part of a broader effort to reshape the international system. NATO expansion was presented as unjustified and inherently hostile, reinforcing perceptions of encirclement (Washington Post 2015).

At the same time, Kremlin discourse emphasized the narrative of historical and cultural unity between Russians and Ukrainians. Putin repeatedly asserted that the two nations constitute "one people" (Trenin 2018), suggesting that tensions between them were artificial and externally imposed. Responsibility for the conflict was thus shifted almost entirely onto Western interference.

Accusations of Western double standards, particularly with regard to Crimea's right to self-determination, further reinforced this narrative. Comparisons with Kosovo were used to depict Western positions as cynical and inconsistent (Kremlin 2014). Alongside these claims, Putin portrayed the United States as strategically reckless and prone to imperial overreach, arguing that sanctions imposed on Russia reflected the typical mistakes of declining empires (ABC News 2018).

The construction of the West as a hostile "Other" also served important domestic functions. By framing Russia as under siege, the Kremlin justified restrictions on political pluralism and the suppression of dissent. Opposition figures and civil society actors were

increasingly labeled as “foreign agents” or traitors allegedly involved in Western conspiracies (Yablokov 2018).

Beyond delegitimizing individual critics, this discourse undermined the very idea of political opposition. In response to questions about opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Putin warned that Russians did not want a repetition of Ukraine’s post-Maidan instability, implicitly associating opposition politics with chaos and foreign manipulation (France24 2017). Public opinion data suggests that such framing resonated with a significant segment of Russian society, as fears of internal division and instability contributed to skepticism toward political opposition (Levada 2016).

Following the annexation of Crimea and the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, Putin’s approval ratings rose sharply, exceeding 85 percent despite the imposition of severe Western economic sanctions (Terzyan 2020). Appeals to external threats were increasingly accompanied by emphasis on the necessity of strong presidential authority embodied in a leader capable of resisting foreign conspiracies. Within this discursive framework, Putin’s continued presence in office came to be portrayed as essential to national stability, culminating in constitutional amendments that could allow him to remain in power for an additional sixteen years.

While the mobilization of external threats has proven effective in sustaining Putin’s legitimacy, this strategy also carries inherent risks. Overreliance on enemy construction may gradually erode regime credibility, particularly if external crises fail to deliver tangible

security or economic benefits. Moreover, by framing political opposition as treasonous and equating pluralism with instability, the regime narrows its own avenues for adaptation and reform. In the long term, legitimation grounded primarily in fear and confrontation may reinforce authoritarian resilience in the short term while simultaneously deepening structural fragilities that could challenge regime durability under changing domestic or international conditions.

Implications

The analysis developed in this paper suggests that enemy-centered legitimation has consequences that extend beyond the immediate task of regime justification. When political authority is grounded primarily in the promise of protection from external danger, the basis on which rulers are evaluated is fundamentally altered. Legitimacy becomes less dependent on policy outcomes or institutional performance and more closely tied to the regime's capacity to present itself as indispensable in an environment portrayed as hostile. This shift can stabilize authoritarian rule in the short term by insulating leadership from accountability for domestic shortcomings.

At the same time, this form of legitimation narrows the range of viable political strategies available to the regime itself. Because legitimacy is sustained through the continual presence of threat, de-escalation and normalization carry political costs. Policies that reduce tension or acknowledge shared responsibility risk undermining the narratives that justify concentrated power. As a result, regimes that

rely heavily on external antagonism may find themselves increasingly constrained by their own discourse, compelled to reproduce insecurity in order to maintain authority.

The implications for opposition politics are equally significant. Enemy-based legitimation does not simply marginalize dissent through coercion; it alters the symbolic meaning of opposition. By associating political alternatives with external hostility, the regime transforms disagreement into a question of loyalty. Opposition actors are no longer positioned as competitors within a shared political community but as vectors of foreign influence. Under such conditions, political pluralism becomes conceptually incompatible with stability, and change is framed as inherently dangerous. This framing helps explain why opposition can be widely perceived not merely as ineffective or undesirable, but as actively threatening.

The fusion of external threat narratives with domestic governance also reshapes the logic of foreign policy. International conflict acquires an internal political function by reinforcing unity, discipline, and the necessity of strong leadership. External pressure, rather than weakening the regime, can be repurposed to validate it. This dynamic complicates assumptions about the domestic effects of sanctions, isolation, or confrontation, as such measures may inadvertently reinforce the narratives that sustain authoritarian legitimacy.

Finally, reliance on enemy construction introduces a long-term tension between stability and adaptability. By narrowing the space for

critical feedback and delegitimizing alternative perspectives, the regime weakens its ability to correct errors or respond flexibly to changing conditions. Over time, unresolved economic, social, or institutional problems may accumulate beneath a surface of symbolic cohesion. In this sense, enemy-based legitimation can simultaneously reinforce short-term endurance and deepen latent vulnerabilities, shaping not only how authoritarian regimes survive, but how they ultimately confront moments of strain.

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