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Bo Petersson

# THE PUTIN PREDICAMENT

Problems of Legitimacy and Succession in Russia

With a foreword by J. Paul Goode

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Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover image: ID 114842407 © Elena281 | Dreamstime.com

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1050-6

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Printed in the EU

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## Foreword

Authoritarian legitimacy is notoriously difficult to observe. While autocrats always insist upon their legitimacy, the ever-present threat of coercion and sanction makes it difficult to know whether their claims are broadly supported in society. Scholars thus tend to distinguish between *legitimacy* as a diffuse property claimed by rulers and their supporters and *legitimation* as an ongoing process of legitimacy-seeking (usually in the form of claim-making).

Researching legitimacy—that is, societal acceptance of a ruler’s right to rule—is complicated by a variety of factors and biases, not least of which being the well-known problem of “preference falsification” — or when citizens conceal their private views on a regime while presenting a public appearance of loyalty (Kuran 1995). Even in semi-autocracies and hybrid regimes, privately-held preferences may be concealed even from neutral observers (including pollsters) on the assumption that they might be allied with the regime.

Arguably, the difficulty of closing the gap between public and private preferences is one of the core reasons that regime change in authoritarian regimes appears surprising. Hence, preference falsification is not just a problem for social scientists but also for autocrats who deliberately cultivate ignorance about the inner workings of their regimes—in other words, autocracies are “engines of agnatology” (Ahrām and Goode 2016). A consequence of this “structural opacity” (Schedler 2013) is autocrats’ uncertainty about the information provided by subordinates as well as citizens. Today’s Russia exemplifies the difficulties created by the structural opacity of autocratic rule. Throughout the 2000s, the Kremlin relentlessly surveyed society to watch for potential sources of grievance that could turn into protest movements. Some observers even mocked the regime’s obsession with public opinion, calling it a “ratingocracy.” Yet this approach to “managed democracy” (*upravliaemaia demokratiia*) failed to anticipate the popular resonance of the protests “For Fair Elections” that followed the combination of fraudulent

2011 parliamentary elections along with Putin's announced intention to return to the presidency for a third term in 2012.

The start of Putin's third term after the 2011-2012 protests signaled an important change in the nature of the regime. Rather than seeking better information about Russians' true sentiments, it embraced structural opacity and escalated its information warfare against domestic and international audiences, flooding the airwaves, press, and social media with a mixture of pro-government propaganda, anti-Westernism, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. Consistent with broader trends among authoritarian states worldwide, Russia's leaders became "informational autocrats" (Guriev and Treisman 2019), preferring to manipulate and divide while mimicking democracy. The new approach did not necessarily improve the Kremlin's knowledge of societal preferences, though its control of public narratives and deft use of supportive political myths presented a powerful façade of stability and competence for mass consumption. The surge of popular support for Putin following the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 seemed to confirm the effectiveness of the new approach.

The legitimation strategies adopted in Putin's third and fourth terms were not mere window dressing, though some have argued that ideas and legitimation matter little for understanding the underlying dynamics of autocratization in Russia. They are not alone, as the comparative study of authoritarianism tends to emphasize coercion and co-optation rather than ideational sources of power. To be sure, the post-2012 shift towards informational autocracy was made possible by the prior centralization of power, weakening of independent journalism and civil society, and the cowing of Russia's oligarchs during Putin's first two terms in office. And yet even these crucial de-democratizing moves benefited from claims to performance legitimacy arising from steady economic growth and the regime's exploitation of the *smuta* myth of the 1990s as a cautionary tale about the dangerous excesses of democracy. Simultaneously, the Kremlin invested in patriotic education throughout the 2000s, reviving a Soviet-style military patriotism fused with conservative and orthodox religious themes that were mobilized in concert with



watershed events of 2014, dovetailing with the myth of Russia rising from its knees to regain its rightful place as a great power under Putin's guidance. From the start, then, the politics of legitimation and power politics have been intertwined in Putin's regime.

From a comparative perspective, the challenge in researching the politics of legitimation in autocracies is two-fold: first, one must identify the regime's legitimating strategies and what they reveal about the nature of the regime; second, the effectiveness of the legitimating strategies needs to be assessed, including their implications for consolidating (or enforcing) loyalty among both elites and citizens.

Bo Petersson's book masterfully addresses the first challenge, using public statements, interviews, and other open sources to meticulously unravel the varieties of political myths and how they evolved in response to the existential crisis faced by Putin's regime in 2011-2012. In picking apart the legitimating claims and their roles in contemporary politics, the problem of succession looms large: political myths reinforce Putin's place at the apex of Russian politics but also traps him there as long as his charismatic authority remains non-transferable to other actors. Putin's personal popularity might be genuine, but it does not transfer to other ruling institutions or parties. The 2020 constitutional amendments<sup>1</sup> institutionalized elements of the regime's legitimating myths (not just in terms of their contents, but also the very process of adopting them), but paradoxically they reinforced Putin's personal power rather than routinizing his charismatic authority. It has long been speculated that Putin has the proverbial tiger by its tail. Petersson's analysis demonstrates clearly why this is the case, particularly as illustrated by the challenge posed by Alexei Navalny – though the challenge is intrinsic to Putin's regime, and one could further adduce the 2015 assassination of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov to the Kremlin's inability to find a solution.

The second challenge – that of assessing the effectiveness of legitimating strategies – is no less complicated. The public artefacts

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1 For a detailed discussion of the amendments and the process of their adoption, see Pomeranz and Smyth 2021.

(in this case, interviews, statements, and public performances) created by authoritarian regimes might reveal the nature of the regime and its limits, but they are not necessarily reliable guides to their inner workings. The pitfalls in analyzing them are many. The intent behind a regime message is difficult to divine, often leading pundits to attempt to analyze Putin's psychology. Whatever the intent of a regime message or claim, it may differ significantly from its effect. When politics are pointedly kept opaque, regime subordinates and citizens, alike, attempt to grasp the meaning behind messages and policies, inevitably leading to misinterpretations and unintended consequences. The mimicking of legitimating narratives may equally provide cover for covert forms of resistance or for bureaucratic incompetence of the sort ruthlessly mocked by Russian satirists from Nikolai Gogol' to Vladimir Voinovich.

Scholars must resist the temptation to infer the effectiveness of a legitimating strategy from a ruler's duration in power or, for that matter, from the absence of overt challenges to a ruler's power.<sup>2</sup> Correspondingly, the notion of *successful* legitimation needs to be unpacked and conceptualized such that it entails more than regime survival. One possibility might be to consider how the politics of legitimation regulate elite competition, determine access to resources, and structure career trajectories. Alternatively, one could examine the range of possible explanations for the absence of open challenges and their points of intersection with the regime's legitimating myths. Still another would be to examine the legitimating narratives that have been abandoned, re-tooled, or held in reserve. Of particular interest in this regard are legitimating fields like gender and nationalism that may be exploited by both regime and opposition.

The difficulty of assessing the effectiveness of legitimation strategies is especially pressing as Putin's regime has reached an impasse. The "Putin predicament," in Petersson's felicitous short-

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2 At the same time, those who would deconstruct the ideational sources of the regime's power must be mindful of the practical and ethical difficulties posed by autocracies for those who would study them, including for one's respondents, colleagues, and students.

hand, is a multifaceted challenge that is rising to the surface in Russia. Almost immediately following his re-election to a fourth term in 2018, the Russian press was flooded with stories confirming his intent to remain in office indefinitely – a claim that appears ensured with the passage of the 2020 constitutional amendments. While Putin’s lingering in power may be a comfort to Russia’s elite, Petersson convincingly illustrates that his reputation as a great communicator has suffered with age and the waning of the so-called Crimean consensus in public opinion. In the wake of Putin’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the poisoning and arrest of Navalny, the absence of alternatives bears clear implications for domestic stability and even international security that are likely to persist. The materials and analysis in Petersson’s book are thus a valuable resource – not just for understanding the politics of legitimation during Putin’s third and fourth terms, but also for future research on legitimation in Russia and other autocracies.

J. Paul Goode  
 Carleton University  
 June 2021

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