

Autocratic Borders: Open, Closed, Existing and Elusive

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The February of 2022 has radically changed the lives of millions of people in Europe. In addition, it has also supported and expanded already existing notions about how authoritarian and highly bureaucratic states are inclined to conduct border politics when the need to limit the political activity of the public is replaced by the urgent need to mobilize it.

This essay analyzes the problem of autocratic legitimacy and stability and examines the way it defines the state's conceptualization of territory, power and border using the example of contemporary Russia's autocracy. Regardless of the rather speculative nature of political decision's interpretation under absolutism, the bluntly aggressive and, on the surface, irrational behaviour of the autocratic regime seems to correspond with its basic survival instincts and its dependence on performance, acclamation and consent manufacturing.

Keywords: autocracy, legitimacy, border politics, social contract, Russia

Introduction

Historically, the notion of borders was associated with military defence of the controlled territories from the surrounding armies. In Max Weber's (1946) definition, the state is a "human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (p. 78). Therefore, the basic structural aspect of any state is the balance of power within the respective borders. When borders change political subjects take different forms as a consequence of power reconfiguration. Vadim Volkov (2012) argues that from the point of configurational changes the concept of territory is inessential since it only depicts the borders of the stable power monopolies. However, the notion of territory and borders is important when we are analyzing not only the essence and distribution of power, but also the essence and political performance of different political regimes, especially non-democratic ones.

Legitimacy and Performance

Russia's haste to formalize the annexation of war-torn territories with moving frontlines and practically undetectable territories has to do with the extensively bureaucratic essence of the regime. The contemporary Russian presidency maintains a massive bureaucracy with departments that monitor the performance of the state. Starting as a troubled democratic state after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, from 2000 to 2008 Russia took a distinctly authoritarian turn and

currently constitutes a performance-dependent political and administrative dominance of a self-interested bureaucratic corporation with a basic instinct for self-preservation that keeps it relatively unified (Silitski, 2009).

Johannes Gerschewski (2014) offers three pillars of autocratic stability: legitimation (the process of acquiring approval based on the empirical tradition of "legitimacy belief"), repression (actual or threatened use of physical punishment), and co-optation (the capacity to link strategically important actors to the ruling elite). The legislation pillar seems to be the most relevant for this paper, as it explains the need for public support and acclamation in contemporary autocracies. Throughout their existence, authoritarian regimes create and support numerous reasons to justify their position in power. The concept of legitimacy may seem paradoxical when applied to the analysis of non-democratic regimes, since etymologically legitimacy means "according to the law" and the term has been historically associated with democratic policies. However, following Max Weber's conceptualization, political legitimacy is not the lawfulness of the regime but rather a public belief in it: "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (1964, 382). As is well known, Weber regards legal-rational as just one of the three possible types of legitimate rule; the other two, traditional and charismatic, are not based on any democratic procedures.

However, in a secular era of law, autocrats and revolutionaries are often forced to create the appearance of civic participation in political decision making if they wish to maintain the impression of legality.

Gerschewski (2014) argues that contemporary autocracies cannot rely completely on the abuse of power and authority in strictly hierarchical order as their historical predecessors were inclined to do. They are defined by a greater degree of interdependence between the ruling and the ruled. Therefore, they have to use the image of elections and responsiveness to public demands to give themselves the veneer of legal-rational legitimacy. In an autocratic state, political power is concentrated in the hands of one person by definition. Therefore, the influence of personality can be determinative and public demand does not define actual political decisions. Nonetheless, in the absence of a strong leading ideology, Russia's autocracy tends to rely on a specific political culture that justifies centralized power by means of extensive references to history, religion, and identity (Silitski, 2009). For the ruling class of a country with imperial history, its past can in some way explain and legitimize the fundamentally illegal act of annexation. Furthermore, it can be explained to the electoral masses as an indisputable victory. The extent of imperial nostalgia satisfaction from new territories' acquisition became imminent with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the patriotic mobilization that followed in Russia. Despite the public inquiry for the democratization of the state that was growing during 2012-2013, preceding mass protests and steadily falling presidential rating, the annexation of 2014 has drastically increased public support of the regime that was persistently getting more repressive. Considering this situation, further annexation may as well seem like a way to raise the support of electoral masses, however illusive the outcome and costly the price of that may be (Rogov, 2016). Moreover, it is difficult to measure the actual legitimizing effect of such decisions, as the survey data on public opinions, on which democracies usually rely when measuring legitimacy, are untrustworthy in autocracies. This way, a certain mismatch between falsified projection and societal reality can undermine autocratic legitimacy.

Social Contract

In *Leviathan* (1651/2014) Thomas Hobbes claimed that at the heart of the statehood lies the agreement between the ruler and the ruled, which is nowadays often referred to as a social contract:

A commonwealth by acquisition is that where the sovereign power is acquired by force; and it is acquired by force when men singly, or many together by plurality of voices, for fear of death, or bonds, do authorise all the actions of that man, or assembly, that hath their lives and liberty in his power (p 122).

According to Hobbes, the establishment of government is an implied exchange, in which the governed sacrifice their freedoms for the protection provided to them by the government. Later this theory was supplemented and rethought by numerous thinkers, the most influential of which are John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The empirical idea of social contact is also important for understanding the process of autocratic legitimization. Being usually limited in power resources, authoritarian regimes do not have a leading state ideology and, unlike totalitarian governments, strive to regulate the lives of their citizens only to the extent required to maintain the status quo. This way, the stability of a non-elected government in such states is frequently premised on an implied social contract in which citizens compromise their political liberties for social autonomy, which the state typically does not violate.

This has similarly been the case in Russia for a long time. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia inherited a politically passive and highly atomized Soviet population and spend many years aggravating these qualities afterwards, emphasizing a power imbalance between citizens and the state. However, with the declaration of mobilization in September of 2022, the alleged change of the social contract took place. It appears that for an exchange of public nonparticipation and loyalty the state does not offer social autonomy anymore, but rather national victories and material benefits. Volodymyr Ishchenko (2022) even sees the mobilization in Russia as a strategy to redistribute wealth among the poorer population that constitutes the vast majority of mobilized men, thus, establishing a longtime war economy, increasing the public support of the war and legitimizing it. This method, in general, corresponds with the third tool of Russian autocracy described by Vitali Silitiski back in 2009 – using petrodollars to finance the population in return for political inactivity. However, today's state is literally purchasing the health and life of the citizens.

In contrast with the strictly regulated migration policy of the former totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, a modern autocracy tends to recognize open borders as a condition for its existence and stability. The control of migration is not something that inherently concerns the regime, the main goal of which is not to mobilize and control all the spheres of public life but to ensure its own survival. When contemporary authoritarian regimes do not possess enough resources to manage the discontent of the opposition-minded population, they tend to encourage its emigration in every possible way, including force, to reduce the critical mass of people who demand reformism. Ivan Krastev (2011) argues that the main reason for the weakness of resistance to new authoritarian regimes is not as much their repressive activity as their openness. In line with this observation, the external Russian borders remain de jure open even after the declaration of a state of emergency and mobilization. It is very important to mention that Russian borders with occupied Ukrainian territories

(that however, became quite conditional after the declaration of annexation on the 30th of September) have been selectively closed for draft-age men from early February, managing migration of their residents and displaying locality of Giorgio Agamben's State of Exception to the full extent.

Conclusion

Since an autocratic regime is characterized by the concentration of power in the hands of one person, the attempts to analyze and rationalize its political behaviour are condemned to always be somewhat speculative. However, modern Russian authoritarianism is hardly defined by primitive absolutism, but rather by a branched and complex bureaucracy, a massive system with a margin of safety, the coordinated work of which is essential for the autocrat's maintenance of power. As any modern autocracy, it is compelled to constantly claim public support and the legitimacy that comes with it in order to rationalize itself. Hence, every action of the structure is under the control of its basic survival instinct. We can see how driven by this instinct the state strives to preserve the status quo inside its borders, but at the same time breaks its own legal framework and claims the territories it has no real control of, thus, losing its power monopoly within a given territory and practically turning into a failed state, unable to perform one of its fundamental functions. However, when the ultimate goal of the unelected regime is to justify and preserve its existence, the other aims seem derivative from the main one, and all the measures serve its favour.

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