

Book Review¹

The Putin Predicament: Problems of Legitimacy and Succession in Russia. ibidem-Verlag:
by Bo Petersson, Stuttgart 2021, ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-7050-0, €34.90, paperback

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The power of official discourse helps to shape and maintain the political legitimacy of incumbent regimes in modern autocracies. *The Putin Predicament* offers an excellent analysis of the evolution of Putin's narratives during the past three decades, with a special focus on the turbulent period from 2012 to the COVID-19 pandemic. Petersson explores the dilemma of the seeming invincibility and durability of Putin's leadership, addressing the issue of succession and the legal, economic, and moral basis for personalistic power justification. The central claim is that Putin built his authority based on charismatic legitimization through the construction of political myths as a method of his ideational self-expression and domination. These myths have been well received by the public, producing a coherent and convincing narrative structure that secured the support and trust of the popular majority for an extended period. Myths possess an "ideational power basis of the regime" (52) to account for its durability. As a gifted storyteller and communicator, the Kremlin chief was able to articulate and exploit new political myths about modern Russia's supremacy.

The book comprises eight chapters with a foreword by Carleton Associate Professor Paul Goode, progressing from an overview of the socio-economic context to the legitimation crisis of 2011-2012 in the chapter "Legitimizing Putin." Understanding public discontent and mass demonstrations before Putin's third term is critical as it indicates deep social dissatisfaction with the ruling regime and the lack of trust in the Medvedev-Putin power-sharing deal. Notably, the civil unrest of 2011-2012 was the largest outburst since the fall of the Soviet Union, and Putin's popularity ratings remained low until the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The subsequent four empirical chapters explore political validation challenges in the international arena through the narrative of "Legitimacy through Othering" (chapter 4), domestic durability concerns in "Challenges from Within" (chapter 5), the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of the Sputnik V vaccine (chapter 6), concluding with the postponed succession and constitutional reforms (chapter 7). The economic growth and regime efficiency that maintained Putin's status quo during his first two presidential terms became impossible due to the downfall in oil prices and the post-Crimea sanctions. Therefore, alternative ideological strategies of legitimation were employed. The discourse of stability, national unity, and domestic order shifted to advancing Russia's recognition abroad.

The othering strategy described in chapter 4 distinguishes and crystalizes the collective self during critical political junctures. In 2000, Putin implemented a harsh othering narrative on Chechen separatists, accusing them of organized crime, weak statehood, and religious fundamentalism—the main issues of what the author calls "the wild 1990s" (71). The list of

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Putin's enemies increased over the years. Legitimization through othering helped him to justify attacks on the Yeltsin-era oligarchs, Georgia during the military conflict in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 as well as the United States (71-72). Advocating for the rights of the Russian-speaking population, the Kremlin regime unilaterally used military force in Ukraine to support the referendum on Crimea's reunification with Russia. The annexation of Crimea won high ratings for Putin among Russian nationalists and secured his status as a protector of 'traditional values.' The Crimean victory suggested that Russia could challenge American post-Cold War unilateralism and guarantee a new world order together with rising regional leaders: China and Turkey. On a national level, Putin destroyed the opposition, leaving virtually no space for a true political rival. His most outspoken antagonist, Alexei Navalny, used social media platforms to discredit the regime for corruption and nepotism. Notably, Putin has abstained from mentioning Navalny's name during official press conferences, invalidating anyone outside the system and non-conformist opposition. Though Navalny's political rating never rose beyond 4 percent, his YouTube documentaries about Putin and Medvedev significantly challenged their political legitimacy, gradually leading to the downfall of the latter. 'Legitimation from within' is based on the myth of the phoenix—the cyclical restoration of order in Russia after periods of hardships and external conflicts.

The COVID-19 crisis allowed regional state authorities to exercise higher executive responsibility despite an overarching tendency of central control. The Sputnik V vaccine became an export commodity and the symbol of Russian soft power. During the pandemic, Putin's public image in social media changed from energetic and omnipresent to exhausted and barricaded behind the desk. The global health emergency, along with economic instabilities, made the constitutional reforms of 2020 possible. Allowing the exceptional right to remain in office for two consecutive terms, Putin's presidential term could continue until 2036. The postponed succession became the central outcome of constitutional changes, along with the provisions to protect the 'traditional institution of marriage,' the declaration of the superiority of the Russian law above international regulations, and a ban that would prevent any future president from holding foreign residence. The delayed succession resolves the immediate power transfer issue in 2024 but does not provide a durable solution. Putin's predicament remains, leaving the Kremlin regime to decide how to transform the incumbent's charismatic authority into a more sustainable ground for legitimacy. The book is well structured and written in a clear manner; it would be useful reading for students in political science, diplomats and anyone who wants to understand the ideological nature of the Russian regime and the evolution of its discourse during Putin's rule.

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