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IDENTITIES AND POLITICS DURING THE PUTIN PRESIDENCY

The Discursive Foundations of Russia's Stability

With a foreword by Heiko Haumann

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Philipp Casula, Jeronim Perovic
Basel, Switzerland

Foreword

As scholars of Russian history and politics, we are following developments in Russia with great interest. In the Western media, reports on this country often focus on human rights abuses, social inequality, rising nationalism, and tendencies toward more authoritarian power structures. Historians observe that access to archives is being limited again. Debates within Russia on Stalinism have become less frequent. A more assertive state limits the scope and the activity of civil society. “Sovereign Democracy” is criticised as a mere “veil” that covers up the above-mentioned tendencies.

Are these assessments correct? Or do they reflect a stereotypical way of thinking that applies Western models of democracy to Russia, without recognising that the country is attempting to develop its own political path? Is this the continuation of a tradition of Western arrogance that is biased by ideas of a backward, barbaric “East” incapable of developing democracy and dependent on authoritarian rule?

In September of 2008, a workshop in Basel looked at these issues from a very specific perspective. Philipp Casula designed the workshop as part of his doctoral project. It was organised by Basel’s Institute of Sociology in collaboration with the Chair of East European and Contemporary History. Its goal was to merge theoretical approaches – namely discourse theory – with an empirical analysis of Russian politics. The thought-provoking presentations and discussions showed that this combination is a promising approach towards an analysis of contemporary Russia. Occasionally, the subject gave rise to controversial discussions; at times, one got a sense that some theoreticians were reluctant to become involved in empirical research. Conversely, some political scientists and historians seemed sceptical as to which tangible benefits theory had to offer.

Philipp Casula and Jeronim Perovic decided to publish contributions to the workshop, along with essays that could not be presented there. The aim of this collection is to document the current level of discussion and stimulate further development of theory-informed discussion, thus establishing a new foundation for the analysis of events in Russia. The volume provides us with fascinating insights into contemporary Russia: We catch a glimpse of discourses there and

of the struggles for hegemony; we can follow conflicts over national identities, symbols, and political myths. Last but not least, the essays presented here can serve as valuable contributions to our “analytical toolbox”: Discourse theory is a promising method for the analysis of political systems.

The editors deserve thanks for this stimulating collection of essays. I hope that it will meet with favourable reception.

Heiko Haumann
Basel, Switzerland

Introduction

The Stabilisation of Russia During the Putin Presidency: Critical Reflections

Jeronim Perovic and Philipp P. Casula

The advent of Vladimir Putin to power in 2000 marked the start of the stabilisation of Russia's political system and economic recovery. Already during his first term in office, Putin set out to re-establish what he referred to as the "power vertical". As a result of the Kremlin's re-centralisation attempts, opposition parties, the free media, or regional governors were increasingly brought under control of the centre. At the same time, the state managed to recapture strategic sectors of the economy and tamed Russia's powerful oligarchs. Backed by strong economic growth and a massive inflow of petro-dollars, Russia also demonstrated a new assertiveness in international affairs.

Under Putin, Russia moved further away from Western conceptions of democracy, stressing the country's "special" path with regard to domestic trajectories and its international orientation. In the economic sphere, the principles of the liberal market were still upheld, yet the state re-established itself as its main regulator, arbiter, or owner – especially in strategically important sectors.

The question this book addresses is not so much why Russia during the Putin era did not follow the trajectory initially expected, but to understand the *kind of stability* that was established during these years. In essence, rather than attempting to understand to what extent exactly Russia has approached the Western type of liberal democracy, we aim to attain a deeper understanding of the essence of stability that emerged during Putin's time in the presidential office. Proceeding from the assumption that the stability under Putin can only be fully appreciated if the Russian discourses on political and national identity are taken into account, we will analyse the trajectories during the past years mainly, but not exclusively, through the lens of discourse theory.

This introductory chapter provides a brief overview on some of the key notions and theoretical approaches that figure prominently throughout the book. We will first present a short description of Russia's trajectory from the time of Boris Yeltsin and assess the stabilisation achievements during Putin. In a second section, we will discuss the Russian democracy debate and establish the link to the issue of identity and the Russian state's role in identity construction. In the third section, we give a brief introduction into discourse theory, especially drawing on the works of Laclau and Mouffe; we will also frame key theoretical questions that we deduct from this theory. Finally, we provide an overview of the book by explaining the different parts and the individual chapters.

Russia's triple transformation

In Russia, stability has long been a central demand in both official and public discourse. "Stability" is, however, a relational term, as it refers to a previous situation that is not considered stable. In Russia's case, the point of reference lies in the 1990s, which are widely perceived as a time of chaos. During this time, Russia underwent a triple transformation. In the economic sphere, the therapy of privatisation was meant to heal the ailing Soviet economy, but was badly planned and poorly executed, bringing hardship to millions of people – while only a few managed to enrich themselves.

In the political realm, democratisation did not lead to a system of checks and balances between the different political players, but was fought as a die-hard "winner-takes-all" struggle. Russia was poorly ruled during a time when all of the central government's energy was absorbed by the fight over political control and dominance – in the Duma, among the Russian governors, or among the powerful oligarchs. Russia's attempts at democratisation amounted in essence to the emergence of a polycentric system where various political and economic actors competed with each other. If hopeful Western observers saw this polycentrism as the starting basis for Russia's nascent democracy, the mass of the Russian people perceived it as a system producing disorder, a rise in crime, corruption, poverty, and insecurity. It is little wonder that most Russians showed a total lack of trust in the state institutions that emerged under Yeltsin.

Finally, the 1990s were also accompanied by a deep crisis of political identity as the regime officially rejected the former Communist ideology. Communism was brought down as the hegemonic ideological narrative, but was replaced only by a vague pledge to "democracy" that was founded on anti-

Communism. The official rejection of established ideological norms was also reflected in the search for a new Russian “national idea”. The confused discussions surrounding this notion mirrored Russia’s ideological void and disorientation during the 1990s.

Against this background, the time seemed ripe for a change at the top of political power. Putin, the man whom Yeltsin installed as his successor, was a largely unknown figure. This, however, was precisely what made it possible for the public to ascribe all those qualities to him that they found lacking in his predecessor. Putin did not come up with a new comprehensive programme of his own and did not attempt to reverse the essentials of Yeltsin’s economic reforms. It did not even seem to matter that he was an appointee of Yeltsin; the public accepted him largely because he was not associated with Russia’s troubled 1990s.

In the eyes of the public, Putin passed his first test as prime minister when he demonstrated his resolution to fight off the Chechen incursion of Dagestan in August 1999. In October of that same year, he ordered Russia’s federal troops to invade Chechnya for a second time. This invasion followed a series of bombings of apartments in Moscow, Buinaksk, and Volgodonsk, all of which Russia blamed on “Chechen terrorists”. While the first Chechen war had not won the approval of the Russian population, the second invasion war was highly popular. Against the background of terrorism hysteria, Putin’s actions were highly acclaimed, as many seemed to believe that Russia was finally succeeding in bringing order to this troubled part of the country. Moreover, many within Russia’s political and military establishment supported the invasion, as they sought to undo the perceived humiliating defeat that Russian federal troops had suffered when leaving Chechnya after the end of the first war in 1996.

Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that Putin or any other new president would have survived long had it not been for important structural changes that helped Russia back on her feet. Putin’s rise to power coincided with the start of unprecedented growth of Russia’s economy at rates of, on average, six percent during 2000-08. Economic growth was possibly due to the after-effects of the August 1998 financial crisis and the increase in oil prices after 2000, which brought a massive inflow of petro-dollars filling the state coffers. Signs of recovery had already appeared in the late Yeltsin years, yet they were felt only later, and economic success was thus never attributed to Yeltsin, but to Putin only.

The combination of structural changes in terms of economic growth accompanied by a more assertive political course to re-centralise state power were necessary factors that helped to create the stability of what in the West was sometimes referred to as the “Putin system”: A highly centralised organisation of power based on a combination of rent distribution to various elite factions, the curtailing of political liberties, and the extension of state control over the economy.

During Putin’s presidential terms, the discussions on Russia’s identity also calmed down. To be sure, the process of Russia’s search of a post-Communist identity has not come to any definitive conclusion, if only because the formation of any political identity (or rather identities) can never be fixed. It is an ongoing process subjected to constant social construction and reconstruction. However, unlike during the early 1990s, the discourse on Russian political identity seems to have at least temporarily consolidated around a narrative that stresses not anti-Communism, as during Yeltsin’s time, but Russia’s “uniqueness” and “special way”.

Already towards the end of Putin’s first term in office, it had thus become increasingly clear that Russia’s triple transformation would not follow the path that Western observers of Russia expected or hoped for.

The discourse on democracy and identity, and the role of the state

Transformation theory – at least in its more traditional version – suggests that a situation of stability is reached once the “endpoint” of the transformation (free market and democracy) is achieved. Thus, many observers of Russia would hesitate to call Russia (or any authoritarian ruled states) “stable” as long as this stability is seen as being largely held together by a system of rent distribution – backed largely by the inflow of oil money – and authoritarian governance.

Nevertheless, the analytical shortcomings of attempting to measure stability through Western standards of democracy are precisely that this is an *outside* perspective that does not consider the *inside* (Russian) view. Thus, in order to complement our (Western) understanding of Russia’s domestic trajectories, it is necessary to comprehend this transformation *sui generis* and look at the essentials of what we have referred to as the stabilisation process under Putin. These essentials can only be fully grasped if analysed against the background of how Russians – and in particular Russia’s political elite – viewed this process, or in

other words, how stability was framed at the level of political and official *discourses*.

The kind of stability created under Putin is connected to a certain type of political identity. To be sure, Russians are by no means ignorant of the key features of a functioning Western-style democracy such as freedom of speech or the right to free and fair elections, as opinion polls have shown (see McFaul and Colton 2001). Polls also show, though, that for many Russians, “democracy” also means order, justice, equity, and a certain level of prosperity. A majority of Russians were especially appreciative of the personal freedoms they gained after the dramatic changes of 1991, yet they rejected “democracy” as it manifested itself in the political, economic, and social spheres.

Also, official Russia never rejected democracy as such; on the contrary, the Putin regime embraced it as an essential part of Russia’s political identity. Nevertheless, Putin’s rise to power coincided with a reading of Russian identity that abandoned formerly Western-oriented narratives and focused on a “special way” for Russia of dealing with modern political and socioeconomic challenges. As Putin put it in his state of the union address on 25 April 2005:

“The democratic road we have chosen is independent in nature, a road along which we move ahead, all the while taking into account our own specific internal circumstances” (Putin 2005).

At the same time, the regime’s understanding of democracy needs to be contextualised through the notion of Russia as a *strong power*, which has figured prominently in political rhetoric. In his 2003 address to the nation, for example, Putin declared that “Russia must become and will become a country with a flourishing civil society and stable democracy.” Later in his speech he stated that: “A strong and responsible government based on the consolidation of society is vital to preserve the country. Without strong power, it will also be impossible to move forward into the future” (Putin 2003).

The idea of a strong state and of Russia as a strong power certainly appealed to many Russians in the face of the disorder and chaos of the 1990s. Then again, these and other official statements also implied that the values of “democracy” and “strength” needed to be combined in order for the state to be able to “guide” society in the right direction. Thus, from a Western point of view, Putin’s statement could be interpreted as an indirect way to justify the empower-

ing of the state at the expense of societal and political liberties. Conceptually, this idea was elaborated further and formed the basis of ideological constructions such as the one developed by presidential aide Vladislav Surkov, who in 2005 introduced the notion of Russia as a “sovereign democracy” (Surkov 2007).

Even though the contents of Russia’s version of democracy remain vague in Surkov’s notion, the kind of language applied here seemed sufficient to strike a positive chord with Russia’s *class politique*, which saw this as an expression of Russia’s right to follow its “sovereign” path to democracy in opposition to Western-prescribed directions. The kind of official rhetoric around democracy must also have resonated well with parts of the population. At least from opinion polls, we learn that a majority of Russians was clearly in favour of Russia following an “own path of development”, which also coincided with high popularity rates for Putin throughout his presidency (Levada Center 2007).

If the 1990s can be aptly summarised as a period when various non-state actors captured the state, the years following Putin’s ascendancy to the presidency saw the re-emergence of the state as the main player in Russian domestic political and economic life. To be sure, the state under Putin was never a unified actor and never able to control all the discursive realms. However, if we attempt to analyse how a certain discourse became the dominant or *hegemonic* discourse, it is essential that we take into account the role of the state in Russia’s stabilisation process.

With the state at the centre of social development, stability in Russia was very much subjected to “what the State makes of it” (paraphrasing Wendt 1992). In constructing “stability”, the state drew on and eventually transformed already existing discourses, with a concrete political purpose in mind. For example, the decision of Putin to abandon the right of the Russian population to elect its own governors – which was an important element in the government’s re-centralisation attempt – was enacted after the Beslan tragedy in 2004 and portrayed as a means of fighting terrorism more effectively. While transformation theory would tend to see a loss of democracy in this action, a more constructivist approach would stress the aspect of inscribing political action in the discourse of anti-terrorism and frame it as Putin’s attempt to “securitise” a political decision (Buzan et al. 1998) for the sake of stability.

Introducing a poststructuralist approach

Unlike other books on Russia's stabilisation process under Putin, this work considers Russia's developments mainly (but not exclusively) against the background of poststructuralist discourse theoretical approaches. Discourse theory and analysis, here, are meant to complement, not to replace, transformation theory. Especially helpful in this regard are Laclau and Mouffe's works (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Laclau 2005), which propose a theory of discourse and hegemony that allows us to grasp the processes of transformation (the guiding theoretical lens of most of the literature on post-Soviet Russia) and to understand the kind of stability created during this process.

If we shift the focus of research to political and national identities, at least three questions deducted from poststructuralist theories need to be addressed: How do these collective identities emerge? How do they change? How do they achieve stability?

How do identities emerge? Identities are seen as being bound to discourses. Different discourses¹ offer different ways of fixing or articulating identities and thus compete with each other to integrate them. Each discourse offers specific subject positions to identify with. The aspects of competition and negotiation make the construction of identities a deeply political process.

How do identities change? This competition of discourses for creating meaning and significance makes all stability in society and all stability of identity precarious. Identity change is thus the result of a shift in the prevalence of a certain discourse, the floating of signifiers between discourses. On a larger scale, identity change can mean the success of a counter-hegemonic discourse to disarticulate hegemonic discourses, to disorganise a certain consensus, and to create an alternative one.

How do they achieve stability? The prevalence of a discourse, its hegemony, is the point at which it becomes the leading ideological horizon in society. It successfully incorporates different discursive elements, establishes an empty signifier, which represents the whole discourse, and excludes certain other elements by drawing a clear line of separation, dividing the social into two camps, and thus constituting an "outside" and an "inside". This shows that while threatening each other, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses need each other to define themselves: They depend on each other to make clear what they

1 A discourse is defined as "a differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is constantly renegotiated" (Torfing 1999: 85).

do not represent (constitutive outside), keeping a demarcation line that provides stability. Identities are therefore always relational:² They embrace what they oppose.³

These three questions make the basic theoretical assumption of this discourse theory clear: collective (and personal) identities are never completely stable or fixed. They are subject to change, negotiation, and reshaping. With this strong focus on identity formation, dissolution, and fixation, we believe that Laclau and Mouffe's approach leaves us well equipped to analyse Russian identity formation – and also get a better sense of what we have referred to as the essence of Russia's stability.

In our attempt to deal with issues of political construction and identity politics, this book places itself in a wider theoretical tradition. International Relations studies have been more inclined than transformation theories to translate the *Cultural Turn* into their theories, adopting constructivist (Wendt 1992; Campbell 1992; Katzenstein 1996) and sometimes poststructuralist perspectives (Connolly 1991; Edkins 1999; Hansen 2006). At least since the 1990s, a rapprochement between rationalists and reflectivists has emerged, with "[m]ore philosophical issues [being] increasingly welcome in the mainstream" (Wæver 1997: 168).

The poststructuralists' basic claim is that it is not possible to step outside the world and observe it impartially. However, this does not mean that there is no world "out there". Instead, what we can observe are networks of (verbal and non-verbal) interactions (i.e., discourses) that construct different realities around one and the same "objective" issue. Similarly, identities are seen as constructs, and International Relations theory has been quick to recognise their importance for the formation of international relations (Connolly 1991; Kassianova 2001; Tsygankov 2006; cf. also Knutsen 1996: 278f.). Hence, introducing poststructuralist and constructivist elements into transformation theory also means releasing it from the grip of a normative and largely Western-centred transitology.

2 As Connolly (1991: 64) succinctly puts it: "Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty. Identity is thus a slippery, insecure experience, dependent on its ability to define difference and vulnerable to the tendency of entities it would so define to counter, resist, overturn, or subvert definitions applied to them." It is precisely the task of hegemonic discourses to offer opportunities for fixing identities and clearly defining otherness.

3 "A hegemonic formation also embraces what opposes it, insofar as the opposing force accepts the system of basic articulations of the formation as something it negates, but the place of the negation is defined by the internal parameters of the formation itself" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 139).

Organisation of this book

This volume is structured into five parts. In the first part, titled “Discourses and Russian Politics”, the book will introduce some key theoretical terms of discourse theory that seem especially useful when analysing the Russian case. The first chapter in this part is devoted to *populism*. *David Howarth* analyses how this notion, although not often used by authors, implicitly describes the basic operation of the political. The primary way in which populism establishes a discursive hegemony is by incorporating as many demands as possible into a discourse that it counterposes against a constitutive outside. *Aletta Norval and Ivo Mijnsen* describe the meaning of *dislocation*. The term is essential for understanding how Soviet discourse was increasingly incapable of incorporating the massive changes that were underway in the late 1980s. It was unable to explain economic decline and failed to articulate rising democratic demands. The signifier “Perestroika” was an attempt to provide a new vision for progress and democratic participation within the Soviet discourse. The “democratic” official discourse started with very similar promises. Here again, the economic and political decline represented *dislocations* that made it impossible to uphold “democracy” as a key signifier in official discourse. In a third chapter, *Philipp Casula* then describes the processes of discursive shifts in more detail against the background of these terms, elaborating how different discourses articulated national and political identity in post-Soviet Russia.

The second part of the book deals with “Regime Type and National Identity”. “Managed democracy”, “sovereign democracy”, and similar terms have been used to describe the Russian regime. The chapters in this part investigate what these terms actually mean for Russia’s everyday practice. More specifically, this part of the book tries to link this aspect, which is *prima facie* merely a political one, to the aspect of national identity that it conveys. The guiding idea is that any political vision for Russia entails a specific imagination of national identity. Thus, this part includes analyses of the political regime that emerged in post-Soviet Russia (*Hans-Henning Schröder* focuses, *inter alia*, on the importance of trust, while *Andrey Ryabov* examines the type of transition), on the articulations in official discourse (*Olga Malinova*), on the ideology of the Putin regime (*Nicolas Hayoz*), as well as on nationalism (*Klaus Müller* and *Andreas Pickel*) and xenophobia (*Lev Gudkov*).

In the third part, the authors of the book will take a closer look at “Sovereign Democracy and its Competitors”. Sovereign democracy as a concept arose

in 2005 and was extremely prominent within the elites' discourse. However, it was more of a description of past policies than a vision for future political action. After the electoral cycle of 2007/08, the importance of the term was diminished, although policies remained unchanged. The authors recognise the importance of the term as an attempt to construct something resembling an ideology at least at the level of the ruling elites ("sovereign democracy" as an ideology of *Edinaia Rossiia* and *Nashi*, for instance). *Victoria Hudson* discusses the connection between the term "sovereign democracy" and the messages it conveys about political and national identity, while *Viatcheslav Morozov* frames it in an international context. *Zachary Bowden*, on the other hand, explores the resistance to this discursive mainstream. "Fascism" traditionally played the role of the *constitutive other* in Russian discourse. Hence, he focuses on Russian neo-Fascism as an attempt to disrupt official discourse.

The fourth part, "Symbols and the Past", deals with specific symbols and signifiers that are important in Russian public and official discourse. Putin's Russia was full of symbolic politics. In the first chapter of this part, *Ivan Kurilla* analyses how the successes of the two presidential terms were linked to a fortuitous combination of economic growth and a skilled use of Russia's symbolic universe. The author shows this by drawing on the case of Volgograd. Under Putin, 9 May and the victory over Fascism in general became a particularly strong symbol: *Ivo Mijnsen* discusses 9 May as an example of a "myth" and demonstrates how this myth of the Great Patriotic War became a nodal point within the official Russian "statist" discourse. *Andrey Makarychev* shows how culture and politics intersect by analysing a wide array of fiction and movies. He demonstrates how such representations add to a variety of political articulations that are deemed to be the basis for identity construction in today's Russia. *Martin Müller* underscores the importance of a "strong Russia" combining ethnographic and poststructuralist approaches at a major Russian university.

In the fifth part, the book offers room for "Outside Perspectives". *Felicitas Macgilchrist* traces Western mediation of potential sources of Russian dislocation and argues that Western media exhibited a lacuna in their reporting on Russia in the 1990s. Many key signifiers of the 2000s had already been articulated in the 1990s, but this went unnoticed in Western media coverage. *Svitlana Kobzar* deals with the role of intellectuals and government officials in trying to fix the meaning of the Soviet past shared by Ukraine and Russia, and with the consequences resulting from the divergent historical narratives. The final chapter in

this part is *Sergii Glebov's* analysis of Ukraine's democratisation as a choice between the West and Russia as two poles competing for geopolitical influence.

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