

УДК 321.6

AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION IN RUSSIA: DIVERSSIONARY STRATEGY OF PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION

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Стаття досліджує авторитарну консолідацію в Російській Федерації. Аналіз простежує, як відволікання громадської думки від внутрішньо-державних проблем та рефокусування на збройні конфлікти в близькому зарубіжжі впливає на формування та поширення цілісної державної ідеології, вироблення «інформативної» пропаганди та поширення цілей і цінностей, спільних як для держави, так і для громадян. Автор підсумовує, що ці фактори призвели до зміцнення авторитарного режиму в Росії, зробивши його нечутливим до зовнішніх впливів.

Статья исследует авторитарную консолидацию в Российской Федерации. Анализ прослеживает, как отвлечение общественного мнения от внутри- государственных проблем и рефокусирование на вооруженные конфликты в ближнем зарубежье влияет на формирование и распространение целостной государственной идеологии, выработки «информационной» пропаганды и распространения целей и ценностей, общих как для государства, так и для граждан. Автор заключает, что эти факторы привели к укреплению авторитарного режима в России, сделав его нечувствительным к внешним воздействиям.

The article seeks to explore the authoritarian consolidation in the Russian Federation by looking how the diversion of the public attention from the domestic issues and refocusing it on the armed conflicts in the near abroad resulted in the formation and dispersion of consistent state ideology, production of 'informed' propaganda, and establishment of shared goals and values of the state and the society. It is concluded that all these factors led to the strengthening of authoritarian regime in Russia, making it robust to external influences.

Ключові слова: Росія, громадська думка, політична пропаганда, авторитарна консолідація.

The establishment of strong authoritarian institutions in Russia clearly indicates that the notion of "transition to democracy" becomes less and less applicable to this state. One can observe the process of authoritarian consolidation, embedment of authoritarian practices within the society to an extent when, paraphrasing famous quote by Juan Linz, authoritarianism becomes "the only game in town." [1, 156] Even though the transition to democracy always remains one of the multiple possibilities, "attraction to transition paradigm may blind us to more important dynamics." [2, 472] Therefore, there is a need for employment of different perspective, which recognizes the political stability of countries with autocratic regimes, characterized by increasing resistance to external and internal demands for democratization.

The aforementioned considerations give incentives for investigation of authoritarian consolidation in general and its ability to transform attitudes, perceptions and beliefs within a society by diverting its attention from domestic problems in particular, a specific Russian trend, reflected in massive public support of the current government. The latter allows assuming that democracy promotion is currently being challenged by the promotion of autocracy, [3] which is particularly important for the stability of electoral authoritarian regime [4, 23]. Even though the elections are not free, the public support in general is important for the regime survival. In case of Russia it resulted in the emergence of so-called ratingocracy, when the regime became overwhelmingly concerned with its standing in public opinion [5,5]. In their turn, parliaments can be used to co-opt non-regime forces, by providing the forum for compromises, and, thus, ensuring autocratic stability [6].

Thus, the research question is the following:

How does the formation of attitudes and beliefs by diversionary strategy influence the authoritarian consolidation in Russia?

More specifically, the research will be focused on the investigation of the results of the diversionary strategy within the attitudinal area of authoritarian consolidation. After the overview of incentives and practices of the diversion of public attention in Russia (with regard to its participation in the conflicts in the near abroad), the paper will proceed to observation of the micro-level of authoritarian consolidation, which concentrates on the discursive power of the state. It must be

taken consideration that the study omits the research of institutional, economic, and external areas of authoritarian consolidation, even though does not deny their importance.

The research of authoritarian consolidation takes its roots in two theories: consolidology and authoritarian persistence, both of which focus on the ability of a regime to survive with minimal changes. Early study in consolidology was predominantly focused on transition to democracy. The theory views the political consolidation as an ongoing process of legitimization at different levels (such as institutions, parties, interest groups, civil society), which leads to the “regime survival” or persistence [7]. However, Thomas Ambrosio argued that the concept of consolidation is more applicable to authoritarianism than democratization, since it elucidates the manner by which the autocrats confront the alternative political development and strengthen their rule within the political system [2, 483].

Another concept, which influenced the formation of theory of authoritarian consolidation, is authoritarian persistence. It aims to identify the structural and institutional factors, which guarantee the regime survival, and to explain what authoritarian features block the democratic change. It must be emphasized that this approach is very static, since it interprets the persistence as the lack of change with no account for possible transformation [8]. In contrast, this research seeks to understand the dynamics of regime maturation, the process by which the authoritarianism became an integral part of the Russian polity. The concept of authoritarian consolidation seems to be the most appropriate for this goal.

Authoritarian consolidation is “a process by which authoritarianism is solidified and entrenched within a political system to the extend that expectations for democratic regime change in the short-to-medium term are consistently pessimistic.” [2, 473] It is a deliberate state project, which is aimed at improving regime’s capabilities to govern society and is driven by political elites, seeking to secure their ruling position [11, 183]. According to Christian Göbel, durability of an authoritarian regime depends on the elite’s capacity to substitute coercion for governing by organization, regulation, and the management of discourses [11, 176-190].

It is possible to differentiate between three levels of authoritarian consolidation: macro-level (establishment of institutional structure of communication, bureaucracy and legal system), meso-level (consolidation of state-society relations in a form of meritocratic networks, semi-competitive elections, mass organizations and complaint mechanisms), and micro-level (creation of attitudes and behavior among mass population by employing government’s discursive power) [11, 183]. The latter level is the focus of analysis in this paper.

Attitudinal consolidation deals with the formation of perceptions and beliefs within the society and elites, ensuring the constant development and stability of authoritarian regime. Research of discursive power in autocracies is based on the assumption that values, legitimacy, and political culture are crucial in underpinning such regimes [9, 606-620]. Thus, an important component of authoritarian consolidation is the construction of public support for authoritarian practices and institutions.

In the case of Russia, authoritarianism appears to be well-entrenched in multiple ways. It is possible to argue that the absence of serious intra-elite conflict, inefficiency and low mobilization power of mass protests, government’s ability to survive challenges and create alternatives to them, as well as direct assistance to like-minded undemocratic governments allow the system to defend itself from democratic pressures and enhance its stability. However, all this is possible only as long as the government either employs coercion or discursive power over the mass public. The high approval rate of the government among mass public leads to the assumption that the latter plays an important role in authoritarian consolidation in Russia.

Creation of attitudes and behavior supportive of authoritarian practices of the government among the mass public is challenging under the hard economic conditions. Currently, government lacks resources to guarantee the public support with the help of the redistribution and improvement of welfare as it was before the crisis of 2008. In this paper I argue that to solve this problem Kremlin employs the diversionary strategy in order to refocus the population’s attention from the domestic hardships to Russia’s activities in its near abroad, where it has proved to be successful in promoting its national interest.

Diversionary theory argues that “international conflicts can be launched by incumbents to divert public attention from domestic issues” [10, 1827]. The conflict can play a diversionary role only under specific conditions: when leaders are dependent on public support, when democratic institutions are not developed (since in established democracies high level of transparency and accountability does not allow to launch diversionary conflicts), and when the state’s leadership fears the forced removal from power [10, 1827]. Thus, for the diversionary strategy to be employed, the mass public should be incapable of preventing the leadership from launching the conflict, but influential enough to be taken into account. The last condition applies to both Russia and its neighbors.

Since it is difficult to operationalize the micro-level of authoritarian consolidation, the research of diversionary strategy will be based on three indicators of discursive power, developed by Christian Göbel: consistent official ideology, production of ‘informed’ propaganda and its dispersion, and shared goals and values tying groups in state and society together [11, 187]. These indicators will be employed to investigate the practice of diversion of public attention by the Russian government with the aim of formation of positive attitudes to the incumbents in particular and the regime in general.

In order to observe the prerequisites and practice of the diversionary strategy, conducted by the Russian government, I observe the dynamics in Russian microeconomic indicators (based on the report of World Bank), approval ratings of the Russian president and government (based on Levada Center sociological polls), and the armed conflicts in the Russian near abroad. The relationship between these variables allows illuminating if the diversionary theory is applicable to the case of Russia.

The actual launching of the armed conflict in the near abroad cannot divert the public attention from domestic problems by itself. For diversion to be effective, it is necessary to set and publicize the agenda, associated with the relevant conflict in particular, and overall mission of the state in its near abroad in general. The attitudinal foundations of authoritarian consolidation can be explored by tracing the link between the purposeful government policy and the construction of common ideas conducive to regime stability [2, 490]. This section will explore foreign policy dimension of these common ideas. In Russia it can be traced with the help of three major indicators: consistent official ideology, production of ‘informed’ propaganda and its dispersion, and shared goals and values tying groups in state and society together.

Consistent official ideology

There is an ongoing debate considering the existence and consistency of official ideology in Russia. While ideology is neither constitutionalized, nor set in any other formal way, the Russian government in general and Vladimir Putin personally promote clear vision of Russian mission, goals, and identity both domestically and internationally. According to Willard A. Mullins, ideology has four major characteristics: power over cognition, capability of guiding one’s evaluations, logical coherence, and guidance towards action [12, 498-510]. This paper does not aim to measure the importance of all these characteristics within Russian state ideology, but to observe each of them by deconstructing the Russian ideology into separate components.

The central notion of the Russian official discourse is sovereign democracy. According to Thomas Ambrosio, it “expresses Russian independence on the world stage and rejecting the legitimacy of external criticisms from the democratic West.” [13, 70] In the international context this concept means that the Kremlin can counter the pro-democracy calls of the West and reject the interference in Russia’s affairs. Sovereign democracy had a direct influence on the popularization of ideas of the “special path” within the country and the necessity to counterbalance “hostile” developments in the near abroad. In terms of authoritarian consolidation sovereign democracy implies the impossibility of challenging the regime with ideas originating from “the West” (for example, liberal democracy), since they are inapplicable on the Russian soil. Sovereign democracy also played important role in diverting the public attention from the comparison of Russia and “the West” on the basis of macroeconomic indicators, and instead emphasized “diversity” of values, differentiating between “Western” neo-imperialism and Russian tradition of strong statehood [13, 79].

Another central concept of Putin’s speeches on intervention is ‘normality’. According to Richard Sakwa, it suggests the naturalness of Russia’s foreign policy choices and is relatively unconstrained by formal ideological norms [14, 12]. The concept of ‘normality’ implies the depolitization of the Russian society and the right of government to make decisions on its behalf. Since stability and security must come before democracy [14, 13], ‘normality’ justifies any foreign policy choices as long as they guarantee the security and stability within Russia. Another important feature of this concept is that it applies to Russia as a political actor on the international arena, in a sense that Russia must be treated as a ‘normal’ great power. Therefore, concept of ‘normality’ plays double role: on the one hand, it ensures the strengthening of the regime by excluding any possibility of challenging the ‘normality’ by the mass public. On the other, it allows diverting the public attention from controversial issues of both domestic and foreign policy, conducted by the government in ‘normal’ and, thus, proper way.

One more important component of Russian state ideology is the notion of Russia-centered world [21, 1256]. Usually it is articulated in the opposition of the EU-centered world and is connected to the international processes taking place in the post-Soviet space. Russia is juxtaposed to Europe, as a bearer of more advanced values and norms. In his address to the Federal Assembly in 2013 Vladimir Putin said: “Today in many countries the norms of morality and ethics are reviewed, national traditions and cultures are erased. They [the West] demand [...] the

obligatory recognition of equivalence of good and evil [...]. Russia will keep to traditional values.” [15] Thus, instead of highlighting the differences between Russia and “the West” in other spheres (such as economy, development of democratic institutions, rule of law, etc.), Putin diverts public attention to the importance of preserving of traditional values, capable of making effective distinction between good and evil. Logically, the preservation of traditional values depends on the stability of the current regime in Russia and removes alternatives to Russia-centered world, consolidating the regime.

Finally, related to the latter concept is the widely popularized idea of multipolarity. Supported by both Putin and Medvedev, this idea argues that the unipolar world as it exists right now (headed by the USA) comes to its end. Instead, the future world order will consist of multiple poles, one of which will be Russia. To ensure that Russia will be capable to act as a great power on the international arena, it is necessary to expand its zone of influence to the near abroad, the latter explained by Russia’s geopolitical considerations, not imperial nostalgia [16]. This emphasis on “geopolitical pragmatism” supports the general idea of centralization of state power, justifies armed conflicts in the near abroad, as well as creates conditions for diversionary strategy and further authoritarian consolidation.

Production of ‘informed’ propaganda and its dispersion

‘Informed’ propaganda implies that every message, published through formal and informal channels, contains certain specific information (data, statistical, legal or normative analysis) with regard to a narrow topic. Combined, such messages create the understanding of the ongoing events, which is supposed to be not only tolerating, but also supportive of the Kremlin’s actions. As a result, this approach allows diverting public attention from domestic problems (by publishing more information on the foreign conflicts than on domestic affairs), and fulfilling the traditional goal of propaganda, i.e. ensuring the public approval of the ruling group and set of ideological notions it is associated with.

One of the best ways to trace the production of informed propaganda is to look at the Russian government’s rhetoric with regard to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. According to Rou Allison, the justifications offered by Russia exploit liberal discourse with special focus on legal and normative considerations. Justification included claims about protecting the Russian citizens, intervening by invitation, and references to case of Kosovo [21, 1260]. In order to be capable of employing these justifications, it was necessary to publicize specific information about each claim: for example, the statistical data about the number of Russian passport owners in Ukraine, consent of “democratically” elected government (and, thus, organizing well-publicized elections, where this government is elected), or legal expertise regarding the results of human protection by Western powers in Serbia.

The recent sociological poll revealed that the Russian public is not only aware of the fact that ‘informed’ propaganda takes place (57%), but also consider it allowable and necessary (36%) [17]. The majority of respondents from the latter group argued that distortion of information in mass media in state’s interests is possible (and, perhaps, necessary) with respect to security issues, events in Ukraine, and foreign politics (for the full list of such issues see Appendix IV). It means that dispersion of propaganda, no matter whether it takes place or not, would be positively perceived by the third part of the population. The latter is an indicator of the considerably high level of government’s ability to use propaganda as a central means of diversionary strategy and consolidation of the authoritarian regime by substituting the objective information with one, beneficial for government.

Shared goals and values of state and society

As noticed by Alexander Lukin, Putin’s regime differs in a fundamental way from its predecessors: it matches the political ideas and culture of the majority of population [18, 89]. Not only aforementioned approval ratings, but also detailed sociological polls on political and economic expectations and values give evidence that the current Russian government is capable of reflecting the aspirations of its citizens. The latter are disillusioned with political activism and democratic values, which were widely popularized in 1990s. Instead, paternalistic and authoritarian practices are viewed as being capable of guaranteeing stability and security for Russia. Under such conditions the diverting of public attention from deterioration of democratic institutions and further authoritarian consolidation is more than possible, since the mass public is not interested in the rule of law or independent judiciary as such. According to Alexander Lukin, the regime will persist until the new wave of disillusionment [18, 89]. However, the transformation of authoritarian regime into democratic one must be more complicated than vice versa, since the ruling elite under the authoritarianism controls more resources, necessary for ensuring the regime continuity, than under the democratic circumstances. The latter gives evidence in support of the assumption that the authoritarian regime in Russia is unlikely to dissolve in the short term.

One of the goals, which seem to be shared by both the state and the society, is to prevent the color revolution within the Russian borders. According to the latest sociological poll, conducted by the Levada Center, only 10% of Russians are ready to participate in mass protests for political reasons [19]. The Russian population does not consider the protest activity to be either possible or necessary and this public opinion is perfectly reflected (and assumingly constructed) by the so-called Putin's 'preventive counter-revolution' [20]. According to Robert Hovarth, Kremlin's counter-revolutionary activities included three measures: creation of the youth movement Nashi, imposition of control over NGO sector and elaboration of the aforementioned 'sovereign democracy'. Without going into details, it is possible to conclude that all these activities were directed at the formation of attitudes among mass public with regard to mobilization power of the regime, ongoing "cold war" with "foreign agents" (or NGO financed from abroad) and continued propaganda of Russian distinctiveness.

Counter-revolution is not limited to the domestic politics. On the international arena, intervention to Ukraine and Georgia can be interpreted as 'civilizational goal' to eliminate the idea of color revolution as an alternative to the Russian 'personalized power' [21. 1291]. According to Alexey Navalny, for Putin, annexation of Crimea was a "strategic choice to bolster the regime's survival", due to its potential to increase "a strategic fervor to a fever pitch" and to divert the mass public from the domestic problems (such as economic stagnation and corruption) to fighting with external enemies [22].

One of the key values, shared by both society and the state, is so-called civilizational nationalism. It takes its roots from 19th century idea of the "special path" of Russia, which argues that the Russian highly centralized non-democratic political system is caused by civilizational predetermination [23, 56]. Kremlin made a deliberate choice to "canonize" the notion of thousand-year-old civilization to replace the old doctrine of Marxism-Leninism and to block the penetration into Russia of "hostile" liberal and democratic trends. According to Aleksandr Verkhovskii and Emil Pain, civilizational nationalism predisposes Russia to authoritarian regime, thus, consolidating the latter by default [23, 52]. What is more important, it is shared by multiple groups within the society, including the "strong-arm branch" of the political elites, liberal thinkers, the political establishment, and the mass public. While Aleksandr Verkhovskii and Emil Pain's interpretation of the civilizational nationalism as an ideological framework of functioning of the Russian government seems to be too radical, it is impossible to deny that the official government supports the ideas of a leading role of state and that of a particular person leading the nation, as well as the necessity to export these ideas to the near abroad. Nationalist sentiments of this kind not only divert public attention from social and economic cleavages, but also help consolidate the authoritarian regime.

Much more moderate view on Russia's nationalism is expressed by Luke March, who argues that Russian authorities' 'official nationality' is a moderate form of nationalism, widely exploited for mobilizational purposes of the regime [24]. While 'official' nationalism represents the Kremlin's ideology and discourses through presidential addresses, governmental statements and foreign policy doctrines, the 'deviant' forms of nationalism are repressed (though not sufficiently, according to Luke March). In contrast to conventional perception of nationalism as a radical movement, destructive for any political system, Luke March argues that since the main aim of this state-centered ideology is to maintain the power of the elites, this moderate kind of nationalism is employed in such a way that it preserves and consolidates the authoritarianism in Russia. Thus, the policy of Kremlin aims to construct the "average" level of nationalism, which would be shared by the state and the society and unite them, rather than separate.

Analysis of the attitudinal consolidation of the authoritarian regime in Russia allows concluding that the diversionary strategy plays central role in the government's construction of beliefs, values, and goals within the Russian society. Refocusing the public attention from the domestic problems to the conflicts in the near abroad resulted in the enhancement of the consistency and influence of the state propaganda, higher demand, and, thus, supply of the "informed" propaganda and its dispersion through media and other channels of public communication of the Russian government, as well as further development of commonality of values and goals between the Russian government and the population. All aforementioned factors led to the elimination of political (especially attitudinal) alternatives to the ruling regime and its ideology, as well as diminishing the possibility of political protest and instability, resulting in the increase of the likelihood of regime's survival in the short-to-medium term.

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